



Beautiful, dead, dissected: The dismembered female body in artistic representation

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines artistic representations of the dissected and dismembered female body that emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, arguing that the eroticised female autopsy subject became a new topos for artistic investigation at this time. It also addresses the continuing influence of this theme in the work of artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Structured around an analysis of the art-historical, socio-cultural and scientific influences that motivated the artistic engagement with the anatomised female corpse, it suggests that artists including Gabriel von Max, Enrique Simonet and Johann Hasselhorst, depicted female autopsies in ways that departed radically from the conventions governing artistic representations of post-mortem dissections in previous centuries. These earlier works were primarily focussed on the dissection of male cadavers and were celebratory of anatomy as an exclusively male endeavour, highlighting its educational value and its importance to the understanding of medicine. The contrast between these works and nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks is striking. Here the focus is on the implied transgressive relationship between the clothed male anatomist and the young, beautiful and exposed female corpse.

Building on research by Elisabeth Bronfen, Ludmilla Jordanova and Bram Dijkstra among others, this thesis argues that these artworks were largely expressive of male fears and fantasies around female sexuality. It proposes further that the same social concerns that inspired the emergence of the

motif of the femme fatale at this time also inspired artistic engagements with the eroticised female autopsy subject, which can be considered as another example of the trope. This thesis also contributes to a dialogue about the nexus between art and medicine through its examination of medical illustrations and its analysis of representations of female reproduction and pathology by artists including Jan van Rymsdyk and Jacques Gautier D'Agoty.

The ongoing influence of the trope of the eroticised female corpse is demonstrated in the latter part of the thesis where artistic engagements with the dissected female body in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by artists such as Otto Dix, George Grosz and Hans Bellmer are discussed, concluding with an analysis of a selection of works by female artists Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman, who have challenged conventional constructions of female sexuality in their reinterpretation of the topos of the anatomised female body.

While primarily concerned with an art-historical consideration of artistic representations of the female body, this thesis adds to a feminist conversation, particularly addressed by Linda Nochlin and Laura Mulvey, about the traditional fragmentation of the female body and the fetishisation of its various parts by men. It also contributes to a broader discourse that examines past social and cultural engagements with death to inform discussions around contemporary Western attitudes to dying and death.

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Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis.

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The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably the most poetical subject in the world

Edgar Allen Poe

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Introduction

In his book *The Seduction of Venus* (1990), France Borel discusses artists' fascination with the anatomised corpse and the autopsy throughout history. Bringing his illuminating analysis of the various ways artists expressed this interest to a close at the end of the eighteenth century, Borel largely dismisses the nineteenth century as a time when innovations in artistic representation of anatomical dissections came to a halt. Borel claims that in the nineteenth century 'there was still an interest in anatomy, but it became instrumentalised to the detriment of fantastic dramatisation' (1990, p. 176). This thesis argues that far from diminishing in importance or drama, artistic representations of autopsies in nineteenth-century Europe represent a significant development in engagements with the anatomised body. The most noteworthy of these developments is the emergence of an artistic fascination with the female autopsy subject, which contrasts strikingly with traditional autopsy artworks that almost exclusively depicted the dissection of the male corpse. These artworks subvert traditional responses to the anatomised body in numerous ways and I argue, represent a new artistic trope which has significantly influenced subsequent artistic representations of the dissected and dismembered female body.

This thesis argues that this new trope differs in a number of formal and ideological ways from conventional autopsy artworks throughout history. Apart from the difference in the gender of the body being examined, I suggest that these artworks primarily focus on the relationship between the anatomist and autopsy subject. This relationship is invariably portrayed in an ambiguous fashion that suggests the sexual allure of the female corpse

and the conflicted response of the male anatomist. The female body portrayed in these works is always young and beautiful and depicted in such a manner that accentuates its attractions and masks its death. The intimacy in these artworks is also highlighted by the absence of attendants and onlookers that populate artistic portrayals of the post-mortem dissections of male cadavers. Nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks were created exclusively by male artists and I argue that their portrayal of vulnerable, sexually alluring female corpses, transgress taboos around interference with the dead body and act as masculine constructions of female sexuality that is compliant and unresisting; available for violation, abuse and penetration.

Much has been written about the emergence of the femme fatale as an artistic and literary motif in the late nineteenth century¹. However, these discussions only focus on portrayals of living women empowered with a sexuality that dominates and symbolically emasculates men (Allen 1983, pp. 1 - 13). A link between the femme fatale and the female corpse has not been made in theoretical analyses, possibly because of the perception that once dead the female body becomes neutralised and ceases to exert any sexual influence. I argue however, that the female corpses portrayed in autopsy artworks from the nineteenth century can also be described as femme fatales, as they exert considerable sexual power over the male anatomists who are shown to be conflicted by the sexual desire aroused by the attractions of the bodies of these young women even though they are dead.

A consideration of nineteenth-century artworks that focus on the

¹Patrick Bade's *Femme fatale : images of evil and fascinating women* (1979), Virginia Allen's *Femme Fatale : Erotic Icon* (1983) and Martha Kingsbury's 'The Femme Fatale and Her Sisters' (1973), are all definitive works on the emergence of the motif of the femme fatale in nineteenth-century art and literature.

anatomical dissection of female corpses provides a starting point for this thesis which investigates why these works began to occur in Europe at this time and what motivated artists to create works in this genre that contrast so significantly with traditional artistic depictions of male post-mortems. How did these artworks reflect social attitudes about women and why did these attitudes arise? Artistic representations of surgical procedures being carried out on living but anaesthetised female subjects also occur at this time, but formally they more closely resemble traditional male autopsy artworks in their highlighting of academic or scientific enquiry. Why did the dead female body excite artistic interest and why did artists choose to particularly eroticise the female autopsy subject? This thesis explores these questions through an analysis of historical traditions in autopsy artworks, an investigation of social and cultural attitudes towards women extant in the nineteenth century, and an enquiry into medical and scientific developments in the eighteenth century that informed a heightened interest in female reproduction and pathology.

I argue that artistic depictions of female autopsies emerged from an art-historical tradition that associated the female body with death. A coincidence of social, cultural and scientific changes in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries contributed to new artistic and literary interest in the female autopsy. The proliferation of artworks that focus on the female anatomical body demonstrate the pronounced curiosity around female reproduction and pathology that proceeded from changes in scientific and clinical medicine in the mid-eighteenth century. Dissections likewise increased in number and importance during this period as the result

of developments in microscopy and the understanding of pathology (Foucault & Sheridan 1973, p. 129). Artists drew upon the scientific interest in dissection and social anxieties around female sexuality to represent female autopsies in a way that captured both the scientific and sexual intrigue associated with the female body at this time.

A further consideration explored in this thesis is a sub-text of male punishment of women for their sexual potency and the perceived moral and social devastation they were considered to be wreaking on nineteenth-century European society. Social theorists such as Jules Michelet and authors including Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola portrayed nineteenth-century women as sexually dangerous and wrote about female dissection in the context of not only its scientific value, but also its social agency in investigating the source of the ‘germ’ of female sexuality. Female characters of nineteenth-century fiction such as Zola’s ‘Nana’ and Flaubert’s ‘Emma Bovary’, are examples of women who are portrayed as being controlled by their sexuality who in turn, morally and ultimately physically, corrupt the men they ensnare. These characters epitomised social attitudes towards ‘fallen’ women who were considered to be responsible for a dangerous contagion which was blamed for a range of social issues including a fertility crisis throughout Europe, a general moral malaise and the widespread incidence of syphilis (Fuchs & Thompson 2005, p. 32). I argue that the female autopsy artworks that emerged at this time capture the physical investigation of the dead bodies of the ‘type’ of women from which these various social problems were considered to emanate. As such, the scalpel in late nineteenth-century artistic depictions of female autopsies becomes the

tool of scientific enquiry but also the weapon of masculine revenge.

This thesis also demonstrates the continuing influence of the trope of the female autopsy subject on artists throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries working both within and outside Europe. In some of these works the figure of the female corpse is substituted by a dismembered doll and in others the investigative scalpel becomes a knife in the hand of a maniacal killer. The artists representing these violated female corpses are in the main male, until late in the twentieth century when female artists take up the motif to produce works that subvert masculine fantasies and present new modes of interpretation of the dissected and dismembered female corpse.

Contemporary interest in historical representations of death

Dennis Enright writes in *The Oxford Book of Death*: ‘to talk at all interestingly about death is inevitably to talk about life’ (1987, p. xiii). Interest in research around death occurs across a multitude of disciplines as society continues to grapple with questions around death and dying². French historian, Philippe Aries published his seminal work on the social history of death in *The Hour of Our Death* in 1977. This work provoked substantial interest and has contributed to an exponential growth of research into historico-cultural engagements with dying and death since this time. Concerns about the perceived failure of Western contemporary society to engage effectively with death has led researchers across a multitude of disciplines to investigate the ways in which societies have engaged with

²This was particularly brought home to me at an interdisciplinary conference in which I participated in Salzburg in 2012. Titled *Making Sense of Death and Dying*, the conference brought together researchers and experts from a range of disciplines to discuss how societies and individuals reconcile the experience of dying and death.

death in the past.

There are two main components to the discussion around contemporary responses to death and dying. The first is the concern that Western society has lost touch with death: that death has become increasingly commodified and clinicised. Mourning periods for the death of loved ones have been broken down into prescribed leave periods based on economic imperatives, while tremendous scientific and medical advances have seen the care of dying family members moved out of the domestic sphere and into medical institutions. Late in the twentieth century, Germaine Greer commented that ‘This is a terrible time to die. Death has never been so mysterious, so obscene or shameful an occupation as it is in our time’ (Loxley 1994: 63). Greer was commenting on what she perceived as a ‘general trend in Western society to shy away from death’ (1994: 63). Likewise, Aries mourns the loss of the ability to engage with the process of death and mourning. He contends that the repressed engagement with death in contemporary Western societies, amounts to a denial of death which he believes is ‘openly acknowledged as a significant trait of our culture’ (Aries & Weaver 1981, p. 580). ‘The tears of the bereaved’ Aries writes, ‘have become comparable to the excretions of the diseased. Both are distasteful. Death has been banished’ (1981, p. 580).

The second concern expressed by researchers into contemporary social engagements with death is that increased media exposure to death and suffering in military conflicts and natural disasters has inured people to tragedy, contributing to a blasé attitude to the death of others and a consequent lack of empathy for those who mourn (Bushman & Anderson

2009). Research shows that a degree of anaesthetisation to death also occurs in popular video games in which players regularly take on the personae of terrorists or mercenaries and participate in graphic simulated slaughter, with points awarded for body count (Anderson et al. 2010). Popular media is also flooded with imagery of anatomical dissections with a plethora of television offerings built around graphic forensic investigations, replete with bloodied organs and buzzing Stryker saws which betray a ghoulish fascination with, rather than empathy for the deceased.

By considering the art-historical, socio-cultural and medical influences that contributed to the emergence of the artistic and literary trope of the female autopsy, I aim to contribute to our understanding of cultural responses to death and dying. My thesis also ties into a feminist conversation around traditional modes of art analysis. As the majority of artworks discussed in this thesis were produced exclusively by male artists, the view of death presented in the works could be construed as not particularly balanced. Mulvey's discussion of the fragmentation of the female body as a masculine device used in contemporary film to objectify women for the male gaze (1989, p. 22), will be shown to be also relevant to the analysis of artworks focussing on female dismemberment and dissection. These works frequently embody the projection of male fantasies of vulnerable and punished female sexuality; indeed as will be demonstrated, a degree of misogyny and male sexual fantasy is embedded in many of the works I discuss. In the latter section of this thesis I examine works by contemporary female artists who use an intriguing array of artistic devices in artworks that effectively redress some of the imbalance presented

in an exclusively male engagement with the dissected and dismembered female body.

Literature Review

Literature on female post-mortem artworks from the nineteenth century is fairly limited, although several authors have focussed on specific facets of the genre. Among the key texts that have inspired and assisted my own investigation include Ludmilla Jordanova's *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender and Science between the 18th and 20th centuries* (1989). Jordanova identifies what she terms an 'obsession' with the female corpse that she suggests is a characteristic of the nineteenth century in Europe (1989, p. 98). Her analyses of a limited number of female autopsy artworks are extremely helpful in informing areas of my own enquiry especially in her discussion of the medical framing of the female body in the nineteenth century. However, as Jordanova's focus is primarily centred on the expression of gender in scientific and medical imagery, a positioning of the artworks in an art-historical context is missing from her discussion and her selection of images is fairly narrow. A more comprehensive sample of female autopsy imagery is included in Mireia Ferrer Álvarez's chapter 'The Dramatisation of Death in the Second Half of the 19th Century: The Paris Morgue and Anatomy Painting' in the book *Faces of death: Visualising history* (Peto & Schrijvers 2009), where she identifies a nineteenth-century artistic trend in portrayals of female autopsies. Álvarez's descriptions of the importance of the morgue in nineteenth-century Paris and the theatricality of post-mortem dissections is particularly enlightening but once again, no attempt has been made to

examine the artistic context from which representations of female autopsies emerged and how they contrast with earlier iterations of the autopsy genre.

Elisabeth Bronfen writes extensively about Gabriel von Max's female autopsy artwork *Der Anatom* (1869), in her book *Over her dead Body; Death Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992). Bronfen is among the principal contemporary theorists to analyse historical representations of female death in art and literature. She considers von Max's portrayal of a beautiful female corpse and highlights his employment of the alterity of the female body to subvert traditional engagements with death. My thesis builds on Bronfen's discussion of the beautified female corpse to include analyses of other artworks from the same genre as von Max's, as well as a range of artistic and literary portrayals of the dismembered and dissected female body.

Other texts I have considered occasionally touch on artistic representations of female autopsies but are more generally useful for historical context. These include Michel Foucault's discussion of the changes in clinical practice beginning in the late eighteenth century outlined in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973). This work informs my interest in the sexualisation of the doctor/patient relationship that also elicited artistic attention during this period and I suggest contributed to the conceptual framing of female autopsy artworks. Foucault highlights the rise of the importance of the corpse as a diagnostic and educational resource as a result of scientific discoveries around pathology. This development is fundamental to the heightened interest in anatomical dissection that occurred from the late eighteenth century. Foucault also details how institutional changes

occurred to accommodate this new interest in the proliferation of purpose-built dissection rooms in hospitals throughout Europe. These rooms become the setting for several of the works discussed in this thesis and underscore the dramatic changes that gave rise to the artistic interest in the representation of female post-mortem dissections.

Karl Guthke provides an exhaustive history of cultural and social interpretations of death in his book, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural history in art and literature* (1999). Guthke considers specific artworks that position women in the role of ‘bringers of death’ and analyses the eroticisation of death in artistic and literary representation, suggesting links between female sexuality and death. As he states, ‘In the judgment of men at the turn of the century, [woman] became the incarnation of a destructive and inherently mysterious power, working havoc in personal lives and in the cosmic scheme of things’ (1999, p. 216). Guthke’s discussion provides context for my analysis of the art historical traditions from which female autopsy artworks emerged. His research is focussed around the question ‘is Death a woman?’ (1999, p. 1), and is primarily centred on understanding the cultural history of personifications of death and does not include reference to female autopsy artworks from the nineteenth century. I argue that the artistic tradition of the demonisation of the female body suggested by Guthke, is perpetuated in illustrations of the anatomised female corpse due to its implied association with disease and moral corruption, and that artworks of this genre demonstrate a masculine contempt for female sexuality.

Richard Leppert’s *Art and the committed eye: the cultural functions*

of imagery (1996), is particularly helpful in interpreting the semiotic language of artistic representations of death. Leppert details mankind's fascination with looking at dead things and highlights how this has been reflected in art. He also describes attitudes towards women that arose during industrialisation, describing 'the rampant misogyny evident in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, and the phenomenal level of male hysteria concerning female sexuality' (Leppert 1996, p. 226). My thesis builds on Leppert's observations concerning entrenched negative attitudes towards women in the nineteenth century to argue that the anxieties arising from changing gender roles under industrialisation were manifest in the proliferation of artworks that further portrayed women as empowered with a dangerous sexuality that ensnared men and threatened conventional gender hierarchies.

Hollis Clayson's *Painted Love* (1991) details artistic responses to prostitution in the late nineteenth century in France, while Martha Kingsbury's 'The Femme Fatale and Her Sisters' in *Woman as Sex Object* (1973) discusses imagery related to the appearance of the trope of the femme fatale in late nineteenth-century European art. Clayson's analysis of artworks inspired by prostitution is relevant to my discussion but does not consider the artworks that focussed on prostitutes' corpses that emerged at this time. My research shows that it was the bodies of dead prostitutes that became the primary resource for anatomical investigation and thus the subject of artistic and literary interest in female autopsies. Similarly, Kingsbury's illuminating discussion of artistic portrayals of femme fatales in the nineteenth century contributes to the understanding of the art-

historical context in which the works I discuss emerged. However, while she acknowledges the role of anxieties around female sexuality in the emergence of the trope, her discussion does not extend to the manifestation of these anxieties in the proliferation of artworks focused on the dismembered female body. Nor does she identify the female autopsy subject as a significant example of the trope.

Other works that have particularly informed my enquiry include Sander Gilman's *Sexuality: an Illustrated History* (1989), Charles Bernheimer's *Figures of Ill Repute* (1989), Linda Nochlin's *Representing Women* (1999), Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* (1993), and Mary Hunter's "'Effroyable réalisme": Wax, Femininity, and the Madness of Realist Fantasies' (2008). These texts substantially influenced the direction of my research and inspired me to consider female autopsy artworks through a variety of lenses. While they contribute significantly to the theoretical and contextual parameters of my enquiry, missing is a determined discussion of the body of nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks as a distinctive genre. Also absent from these works is an analysis of the art-historical derivation of female autopsy artworks; their difference to earlier artistic representations of anatomical dissections; their importance as tropic examples of the femme fatale, and their influence on later artistic representations of dissected and dismembered female bodies. Through its exploration of these considerations, this thesis extends our understanding of cultural engagements with death and contributes to a broad discourse around the nexus between art and medicine. More specifically the research

discussed in this thesis adds to our understanding of images of the dissected and dismembered female body.

Thesis Structure

Chapters one, two and three comprise the central argument of my thesis and present discussions about the emergence of the female autopsy subject in art during the nineteenth century from three separate but interrelated perspectives - the art historical, the socio-cultural and the medical. Chapters four and five consider the influence of the trope on later artistic engagements with the dissected and dismembered female body.

In chapter one I employ an art historical lens to investigate the artistic tradition in representations of autopsies which preceded the emergence of female autopsy artworks in the nineteenth century. Beginning in the ancient world I examine a selection of works that exemplify the various approaches to representations of post-mortem dissections and discuss the diverse motivations for both the autopsies themselves and the artistic depictions they inspired. These provide a striking contrast to the female autopsy artworks that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, an analysis of which is the central concern of the final section of this chapter. Artworks of female post-mortems by Austrian, Gabriel von Max, Spanish artist, Enrique Simonet and German artist, Johann Hasselhorst, are discussed with a particular focus on the characteristics that unite these works with each other and mark them out as distinctive from male autopsy artworks. Male post-mortem paintings by French artists, Francois Feyen-Perrin and Henri Gervex are also discussed here to illustrate my argument

for the significant formal and conceptual contrasts manifest in female and male autopsy artworks from this period.

Chapter two investigates how changing conditions in nineteenth-century European society provided the impetus for the development of artistic interest in female dissection. I examine how social changes emerging out of industrialisation impacted on the lives of women and attitudes toward them. In particular I discuss cultural responses to these changes in the form of artistic and literary works that manifest new modes of interpretation of the female body and female dissection. This chapter demonstrates how the eroticised female autopsy subject became a recognisable image through the social currency it was given in its depiction in works of fiction, caricature and art. I also argue in this chapter, for the validity of the motif to be considered as a sub-genre of the *femme fatale* trope with reference to specific literary and artistic examples.

The nexus between art and medicine as it relates to nineteenth-century artistic depictions of female autopsies is the focus of the third chapter. Beginning with a consideration of Foucault's analysis of the changes in clinical medicine in the late eighteenth century, I demonstrate how the scientific determination to reveal the secrets of the human body through dissection became increasingly focussed on the female body (Cunningham 2010, p. 147). The most notable early obstetric anatomists were William Hunter, William Smellie and Charles Jenty, and the medical artworks of their dissected female corpses by Dutch painter and engraver, Jan van Rymdyk are closely considered in the early section of this chapter.

The new artistic interest in the dissected female corpse inspired by van Rymsdyk's drawings is traced here, as I argue that artists moved away from a medical and scientific imperative to increasingly eroticise the dead female body and ultimately sexualise the relationship between anatomist and subject. Also considered in this chapter are nineteenth-century wax moulages of female pathological conditions and the so-called 'anatomical Venuses': wax medical models produced in Florence in the late eighteenth century, in which the dissected female form is significantly eroticised in comparison to the male wax models. Analyses of these works demonstrate an enhanced medical interest in the female body that informed the evolution of the eroticised female autopsy subject in art.

In the fourth chapter I investigate how imagery of the dissected and dismembered female corpse influenced artists beyond the context in which it first appeared. Consideration is given to early twentieth century artworks by North American artists John Wilkes Brodnax and William Mortensen that replicate many of the formal characteristics of the nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks to which they respond. I then turn my attention to European examples, focussing particularly on works by German artists Otto Dix and George Grosz, who constructed their own versions of the dissected female corpse in a series of *Lustmord* artworks³. Hans Bellmer's *Poupées* are also considered in this chapter, where I argue that his eroticised and dismembered dolls provoke similar feelings of transgressive sexual tension to those produced in the female anatomical works in the eighteenth and

³Lustmord: literally 'sex-murder', a term derived from criminology and psychology, assigned to artistic representations of the sexual-murder of women by men.

nineteenth centuries. Other Surrealist artworks by Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti and René Magritte are also discussed here as they demonstrate alternative artistic employments of female dismemberment to extend conventions of masculine fantasies of female sexuality in works that inevitably objectify the female body.

The works of contemporary female artists Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman present an intriguing and confronting re-evaluation of the dismembered female body in creative responses to a trope traditionally handled by male artists. In the final chapter, I argue that works by these artists subvert the masculine fantasies associated with the motif as it arose in the nineteenth century. These artworks reference a host of earlier formal influences of the trope and as such serve to perpetuate the artistic interest in the eroticised, dissected and dismembered female body but also call into question many of the ideological assumptions that inform earlier artistic engagements with the dissected female corpse.

Chapter one

Eros and Thanatos: The emergence of the eroticised female autopsy subject in art

It was an interesting show, especially when there were women displaying their bare breasts. This brutal display of naked bodies spattered with blood, sometimes with holes in them, held him spellbound. One day he saw a young woman of twenty, a buxom working-class girl, apparently asleep on her stone slab, her fresh, plump body taking on most delicate hues with the pallor of death... He lingered over her for a long time, running his eyes up and down her body, lost in a sort of fearful desire.

Émile Zola

The ‘fearful desire’ that French novelist Émile Zola describes in this quote from his 1867 novel *Therese Raquin* (Zola, Em & Tancock 1962, p. 109), captures the essence of the new fascination with the female autopsy subject that developed in Europe during the period in which he was writing. As will be argued in this chapter, this erotic interest in the subjects of post-mortem dissections is one of the defining characteristics of nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks that contrast significantly with examples of male autopsy artworks throughout history. The central aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the emergence of the female autopsy artwork as a distinct genre that arose in the middle of the nineteenth century in Europe. As such, the first section of this chapter centres on the evolution of artistic representations of post-mortem dissections to reveal a consistent focus on the dissection of male cadavers until the late eighteenth century when artists began to represent the anatomised female corpse on a regular basis. In

contrast to nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks, I show that earlier illustrations of post-mortem dissections were primarily motivated by an emphasis on religious investigations into the divine workings of God, changing during the Italian Renaissance when the rise of Humanism engendered a greater interest in scientific investigation manifest in the extraordinarily detailed anatomical studies by Leonardo da Vinci and Andreas Vesalius. A number of ‘anatomy lesson’ artworks from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries depicting the dissection of the male corpse are examined in this chapter to demonstrate that the lack of erotic interest in the subject of dissection, the gaze of the living participants and the large number of onlookers portrayed in these works mark them as conceptually distinct from the female autopsy artworks that followed. I then focus on the departure from the artistic conventions that typify autopsy artworks up until the mid-eighteenth century to show the dramatic shift in attention from male to female subjects that occurred at this time. The final section of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the development of paintings of beautiful, young autopsy subjects in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe which significantly focus on the implied transgressive relationship between male anatomist and female corpse, arguing that these artworks constitute a discernibly new trope of female death.

The female autopsy artworks on which I centre my discussion in the latter part of this chapter depict the corpse as it lies within the funerary or medical morgue in preparation for, or in the process of, being surgically examined. These works are particularly significant to the development of my thesis as they exemplify the most dramatic evolution in artistic

representations of the anatomised corpse. The autopsy subject portrayed in these artworks is usually an unidentified individual who nevertheless displays distinctly personal characteristics, differentiating this genre from the abundant anatomical drawings that were created to show the position of bodily organs and structures.

Historical conventions in artistic representations of human autopsies



Figure 1. Funerary Painting, Cubiculum I, Via Latina Catacoma, Roma, 4th Century

Artistic representations of human autopsies became particularly prevalent in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, when the rise of the empirical sciences saw the development of interest in anatomical dissection (Kramarae & Spender 2000, p. 50). However, works of this genre were not a new phenomenon. Friezes in the Roman catacombs show examples of fourth-century funerary artworks representing early post-mortem

examinations (Figure 1). In many ways these earliest illustrations are formal antecedents to the plethora of artistic representations of post-mortem dissections throughout history until the mid-eighteenth century in Europe. The supine central figure of the corpse in this work surrounded by a coterie of practitioners, attendants and observers arranged behind the subject, represent the formulaic composition that was replicated with various modifications in dozens of autopsy artworks up until the mid-nineteenth century when a distinct genre of female post-mortem artworks emerged. These early works were not concerned with a scientific or medical exploration of human anatomy however, being primarily aimed at emphasising the ascendancy of the immortal soul over the corporeal body (De Pascale & J. Paul Getty Museum. 2009, p. 249).

In the thirteenth century, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, decreed that a public dissection take place at the Salerno medical school every five years in the interests of medical and scientific research (2009, p. 249). This scientific interest is referenced in one of the very few autopsy artworks from this period. The painting of the post-mortem dissection of a male cadaver (Figure 2), from 1240 is attributed to Barthélemy l'Anglais from his encyclopaedic book, *De proprietatibus rerum*⁴. The characteristics observed in the Roman frieze are readily identifiable in this work, and despite the claimed scientific imperative in post-mortem dissections in this period, the attending observers are all ecclesiastical representatives interested in witnessing the 'handiwork of God' in the design and creation of the human

⁴On the properties of things



Figure 2. Barthélemy l'Anglais, Dissection scene from *De proprietatibus rerum*, 1240

corpus, as well as the connections between bodily organs and the soul (Manning 2012, pp. 43,44).

It is important to note the absence of female participants in these early autopsy artworks, reflecting the fact that women were excluded from what was considered an essentially masculine pursuit. As Andrew Cunningham relates, the historical evidence demonstrates that anatomical investigation was ‘a male activity, conducted by men for the education, edification and entertainment of men’ (2010, p. 142). The role of women, according to Cunningham, was to be ‘absent from the audience’ at anatomical investigations as the anatomical theatre was not considered an appropriate place for women: not only was naked flesh exposed during post-mortem investigations, the visceral nature of human dissections was considered ‘repulsive’ to female sensibilities (2010, p. 144). Cunningham goes on to state that occasionally mask-wearing women were noted as being

spectators at anatomical dissections, which was tolerated in some contexts as long as they remained 'invisible'(2010, p. 143). He adds that there were no female students of medicine or surgery in European Universities, and women who expressed an interest in anatomical dissection were invariably characterised as 'monstrous' (2010, p. 142).

The characterisation of women's involvement with the study of anatomy as transgressive is particularly important as it contributed to a sentiment that their inclusion in anatomical dissections, even as the autopsy subject, was somehow 'improper'. This sentiment contributed to the scarcity of artistic portrayals of female dissections and the preponderance of illustrations of male autopsies up until the late eighteenth century. When women finally began to appear on the dissection table in artworks, a sense of their impropriety in being there is perpetuated, and their role as the subject of post-mortem examination is more ambiguous with a sense of moral condemnation associated with the female corpse that was largely absent when the subject was male. This is achieved through the framing of the autopsy in a darkened, intimate setting with few if any attendants and observers present. As such, artworks depicting female autopsies appear secretive and closeted in contrast to male autopsy artworks, signifying the immorality of the female autopsy subject and implying that the depicted procedure is not purely scientific when the female corpse is involved.

Anatomical dissection as a masculine pursuit is particularly highlighted in an autopsy painting that celebrates the union of two exclusively male professions into the Barber-Surgeon's Guild; the body

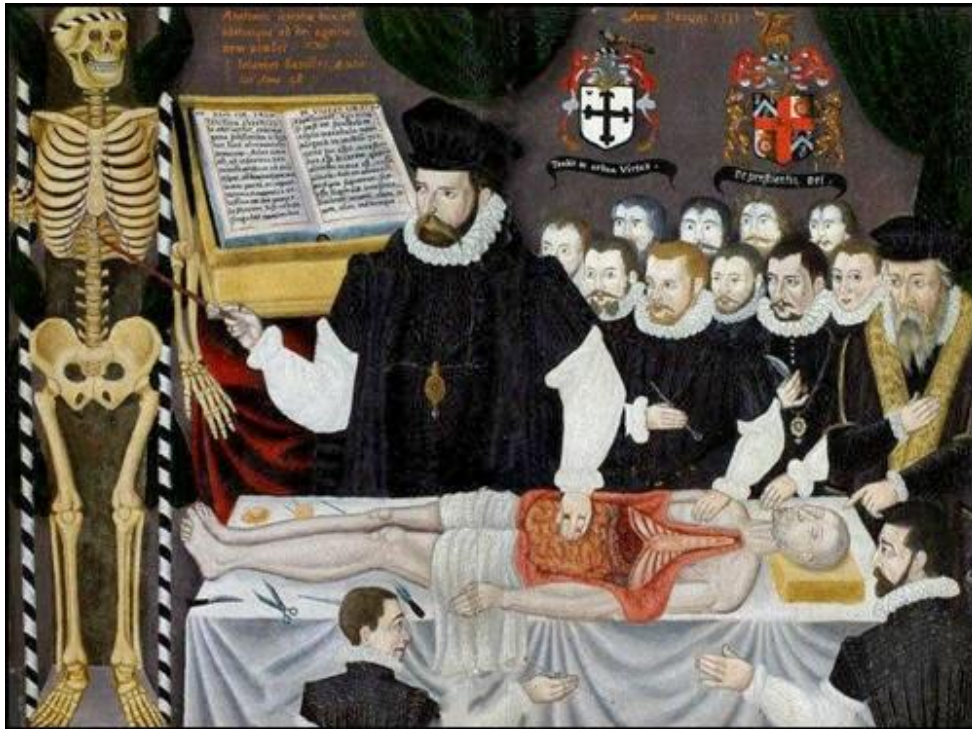


Figure 3. Artist unknown, *John Banister delivering a visceral lecture at the Barber-Surgeons' Hall, 1581*

responsible for conducting anatomical teaching in London at the end of the sixteenth century (Power 1913, p. 20) (Figure 3). In this painting, anatomist John Banister performs an autopsy on a male cadaver while delivering the ‘visceral lecture’ to the company of Barber-Surgeons (1913, p. 20). The Latin inscription in the top left corner of the work translates as ‘Anatomy is the leader of knowledge, and shows the way to the knowledge of God’ (Cunningham 2010, p. 48), again testifying to the dual influence of science and religion on the motivations for early anatomical dissections. Once again this work is characterised by a multitude of male observers standing behind the corpse.

Another defining characteristic of male dissection illustrations that is particularly exemplified in this work is the direction of the gazes of the living participants in regard to the corpse. In male autopsy artworks the

anatomist and attendants almost uniformly look away from the post-mortem subject. Thus in this work, the attendants look towards Bannister, whose own gaze is focussed on the skeleton rather than the corpse before him. This is significant as it highlights the educative tone of the work and, in contrast to the later female autopsy artworks, deflects attention away from the specific relationship between the anatomist and the subject. With the emergence of artworks where the subject of the dissection is female, the relationship between anatomist and corpse becomes paramount to our understanding of the works as the gaze of the anatomist is unambiguously directed at the beautiful young female body. Like many male autopsy artworks, the painting of the Barber-Surgeon's guild is not at all concerned with the relationship between surgeon and corpse. Rather, the main purpose of this work is its facility as a commemorative illustration which heralds the significance of masculine scientific endeavour, and in this case, the occasion of Bannister's lecture; his importance reflected in the scale of his body relative to the other men in the work.

During the Italian Renaissance, a particular engagement between the artist and the corpse emerged when the rise of humanism inspired artists to investigate the internal workings of the human body in a deliberate and painstaking manner and meticulously record their observations in anatomical drawings. Among the most illustrious and influential of the Renaissance artists interested in anatomy were Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti, both of whom based their drawings on cadavers displayed at the Hospital of Maria Nuova in Florence, with Leonardo

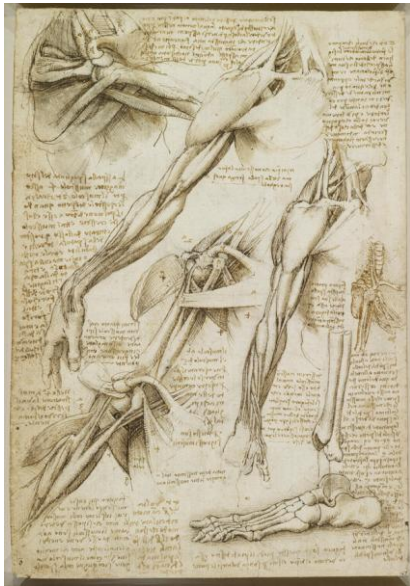


Figure 4. Leonardo da Vinci,
Anatomical drawing, 15th Century

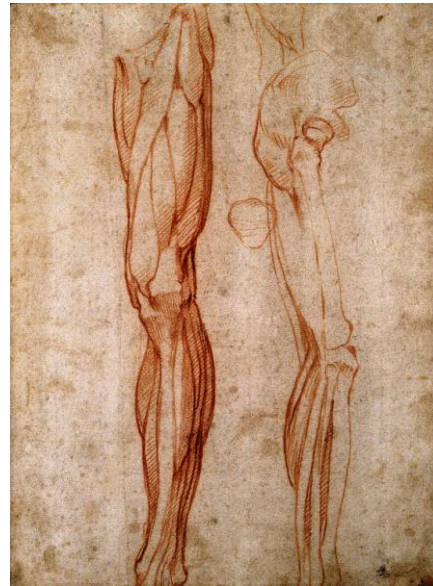


Figure 5. Michelangelo Buonarroti,
Muscles of the left leg, c1515 - 1520

dissecting some thirty corpses himself and sketching his discoveries as they were revealed (Figure 4) (Leppert 1996, p. 129). According to Sherwin Nuland, Leonardo was the first to make anatomical drawings from actual cadavers, with surgeons and medical teachers previously antagonistic to the use of anatomical drawings, viewing them as mere distractions from medical texts (2000, p. 118). Leonardo believed that this approach was flawed, stating: ‘It seems to me that those sciences are vain and full of error which are not born of experience’ (Honour & Fleming 2005, p. 467). Touting ‘first-hand experience as the ‘mother of all certainty’, Leonardo’s sketches manifest a conspicuous effort to present the dissected corpses in as realistic manner as possible; the size, shape, position and utility of the various organs, muscles and bones being the primary focus of these works.

Although these sketches also demonstrate an interest in the female body, they are significantly different from the artistic depictions of female dissections in the nineteenth century. Both Leonardo and Michelangelo’s

(Figure 5) anatomical investigations were motivated by a desire to understand how the body was constructed; the partial studies of human limbs and organs serving as resource material for their magnificent paintings of the human body (Honour & Fleming 2005, p. 467). As such, their approaches to male and female anatomy were essentially the same and there is no evidence of salacious interest in the representation of the various body parts. There is a degree of scientific integrity in these works that is absent from artistic engagements with the anatomised female body in nineteenth century post-mortem artworks. In these later works, despite their scientific framing, the primary intention is voyeuristic rather than scientific, as the artist takes little interest in the internal workings of the human body but rather exploits the opportunity to reveal the exposed and eroticised body of the female corpse.

Despite the abundance and precision of Leonardo and Michelangelo's anatomical studies, it is Belgian anatomist Andreas Vesalius who is responsible for the greatest collection of anatomical artworks from this period and who is considered to have made the most revolutionary contribution to the understanding of human anatomy in the Renaissance era. In his *De humani corporis fabrica*, published in 1543, Vesalius, like Leonardo and Michelangelo, fastidiously represented the organs, muscles and skeletal structure of the human body in an extraordinary number of studies. Vesalius also produced seventeen full body studies (all male), showing the human form in various states of dissection from a variety of angles. The narrative style of presenting these full-body anatomised corpses, contrasts with Leonardo and Michelangelo's realistic presentation of body

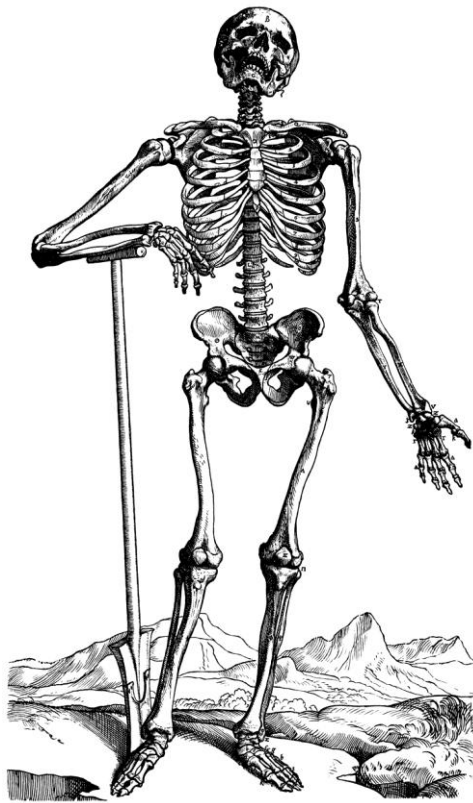


Figure 6. Andreas Vesalius, *Skeletal figure with grave diggers spade*, 1543

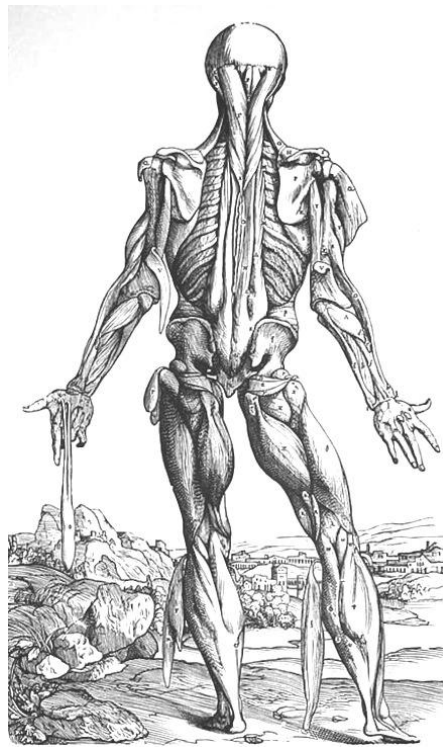


Figure 7. Andreas Vesalius, *Écorché in Italian landscape*, 1543

parts as the pieces of lifeless flesh, bodily organs and bones that they were. Vesalius animated his corpses and posed them in tableaux often referencing issues around human mortality. Thus in one, a skeleton stands in a barren landscape leaning on a grave-digger's spade, an open pit at his feet (Figure 6). His head is tipped back, perhaps directing his sightless eyes to heaven as his mouth opens in a cry of anguish. In another, Vesalius represents an *écorché*⁵ surveying an Italianate landscape; strips of flesh or skin, still attached but falling away from his wrist and knees (Figure 7). Vesalius' motivation in presenting his anatomical studies in a narrative style reflects his belief in the knowledge of anatomy as leading to a knowledge of God (Cunningham 2010, p. 50). Thus his illustrations, while educative in a scientific manner, also reference the transience of life and the corruptibility of the human body. The reanimation of the lifeless body employed by Vesalius, represents a significant departure from conventional strategies in depicting the anatomised corpse and was influential on later artistic portrayals of dissected bodies, especially those of female autopsy subjects who are frequently depicted as still living. However, whereas Vesalius animated his flayed and fleshless male corpses to narrate a moral tale related to the vanity of life, the animation of female anatomised corpses in artworks from the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries is used to deliberately highlight their sexuality and enhance their erotic allure.

A rare illustration of the dissection of a female corpse from this time is included on the title page to Vesalius' second edition of *De humani*

⁵Literally 'flayed' or 'skinned'. Used to describe anatomical models which are portrayed without their skin.

inspired it. The overwhelming majority of the anatomical illustrations within Vesalius' book are of male cadavers and the cover page was produced more as a means of scientific point-scoring rather than as a legitimate reflection of the bulk of Vesalius' practice. A comprehensive analysis of this engraving is provided by John Saunders and Charles O'Malley in their book, *The Anatomical Drawings of Andreas Vesalius* (1982), in which they reveal that the engraving was primarily aimed at demonstrating Vesalius' proficiency as an anatomist and the esteem in which he was held. Thus the female subject demonstrates Vesalius' revision of second century, Greek physician, Galen's description of female reproductive anatomy. Vesalius made a point of illustrating that he, unlike Galen, had actually dissected a female cadaver and had discovered many serious errors in Galen's conclusions (Vesalius, Saunders & O'Malley 1982, p. 42). Vesalius was determined to demonstrate that he had proceeded far further in his investigations than Galen (who had never dissected a human corpse), and thus included this engraving on the cover page of his magnum opus.

The 'anatomy lesson'

It was following the Renaissance that a particular genre of autopsy painting emerged and proliferated throughout Europe that was particularly influential to the development of nineteenth-century paintings of female autopsies. *Anatomy lesson of Dr Willem van der Meer* (Figure 9), painted in 1617 by Dutch artist Michiel van Miereveld, is an example of this genre of



Figure 9. Michiel van Miereveld, *Anatomy lesson of Dr Willem van der Meer*, 1617

‘anatomy lesson’ paintings that are characterised by a supine, modestly displayed male corpse surrounded by a large group of enthusiastic surgeons and onlookers. The tools of the surgeon’s trade figure prominently in this work and as with the skeletons hanging in the left mid-ground, the scientific context is referenced with other evidence of anatomical investigation. This painting was commissioned by the surgeon's guild in Delft (Bordin & Polo D'Ambrosio 2010, p. 194), and suitably fulfils its purpose as both a medical reference and a testimony to the serious and important work of the surgeons pictured.

Likewise Rembrandt van Rijn’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, painted in 1632 (Figure 10), *Anatomy Lesson* attributed to an unnamed Flemish artist from the seventeenth century (Figure 11), and *Anatomy lesson of Dr Willem Röell* (1728), by Cornelis Troost (Figure 12),



Figure 10. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632



Figure 11. Artist Unknown (Flemish), *Anatomy Lesson*, 17th Century



Figure 12. Cornelis Troost, *Anatomy lesson of Dr Willem Röell*, 1728

exhibit a range of consistent characteristics that identify them as belonging to a particular artistic genre. Firstly and significantly, all these paintings have variations of the same title, relating to the fact that a ‘lesson’ is being illustrated and highlighting the educational aspect of the operation. This is also alluded to in the inclusion in each work of an attending surgeon and a similarly earnest and engaged group of acolytes. Secondly, once again is the complete absence of any women depicted in the theatre, either as living participants or as the dead subject of the investigation, perpetuating the sense of masculine association with scientific endeavour.

Another consistent characteristic of these paintings also exemplified in the painting of the Barber-Surgeons’ Guild (Figure 3), that contrasts significantly with later female autopsy works is the direction of the gazes of the attendant students. It would be reasonable to assume that in an anatomy

lesson, the eyes of the students would generally be focussed on the work of the anatomist. Intriguingly in these artworks this is patently not the case. Indeed, those students who actually appear to be looking at the body are the exception, with the vast majority looking out of the work directly at the viewer, at each other, or elsewhere out of the picture frame. In none of these works is the anatomist looking at the body he is dissecting. This has the effect of deflecting attention away from the corpse itself. Although the cadaver is always centrally located, the lack of interest in it exhibited by the living participants conveys an air of objective detachment from the subject of the dissection, reducing it to little more than a prop. The other effect of the outward gaze in these paintings is to turn them into essentially public affairs. The viewer is frequently engaged by the focus of one or more of the subjects which enhances the sense of the event as public and inclusive. These characteristics become especially significant when we witness their subversion in nineteenth-century morgue paintings in which the subject of the autopsy is female.

Finally, as with earlier artistic representations of male autopsies, the bodies of the subjects of the dissections depicted here are not aestheticised. The wounds are obvious and visceral and the corpses are clearly dead, with Troost's in particular, bloated and green-hued. The corpses appear in these works as lifeless specimens and there is no sense of erotic interest in the displayed body that is such a significant characteristic of the female autopsies that began to be illustrated in the decades following Troost's example.

Erotic encounters: The female autopsy subject in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

A significant change occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century in the way that the anatomised corpse was represented artistically, with the proliferation of depictions of dissections of the female body largely replacing the portrayal of the male corpse, which became comparatively rare. Despite the introduction of the female corpse to these artworks, they still remained essentially male affairs, with male artists depicting male anatomists. Indeed, the change in the gender of the autopsy subject exacerbated the idea of anatomy as a ‘men’s club’, as the depiction of the female body in these works is significantly aimed at satisfying a male gaze. This is demonstrated in the development of an erotic aesthetic associated with the female corpse as one of the most notable contrasts with the ‘anatomy lesson’ artworks that preceded them. Interestingly Jordanova notes that ‘explicit illustrations of female genitals’ also began appearing in medical texts at this time, when formerly these would have been covered (1989, p. 61). This observation supports the proposal that interest in the sexualised female medical body particularly emerged at this time in distinct contrast to the continuation of a primarily scientific engagement with the male medical body.

A particularly striking example of this new artistic engagement with the anatomised female corpse is manifest in French anatomist and artist Jacques Gautier d’Agoty’s study of the female spinal column and associated structures in *Back Muscles* from 1745 (Figure 13). This work is especially

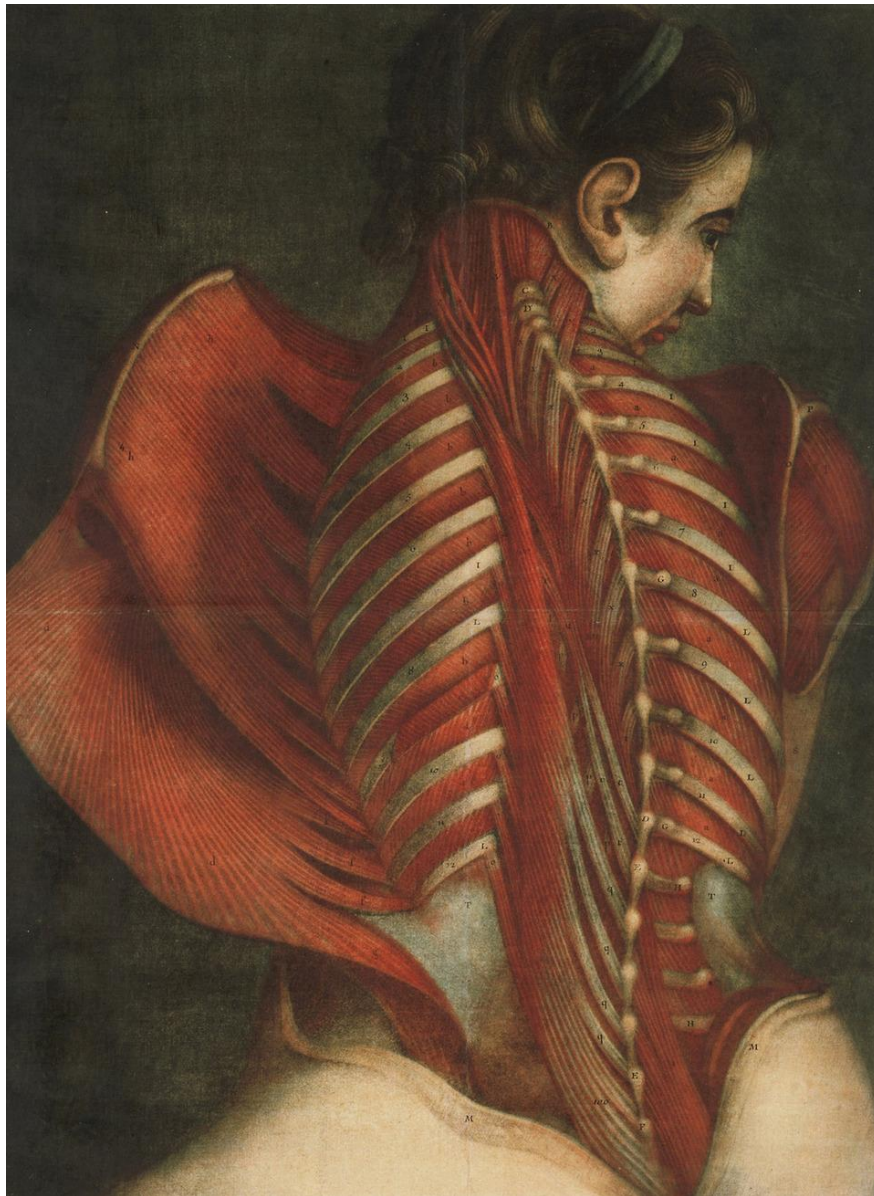


Figure 13. Jacques Gautier d'Agoty, *Back Muscles*, 1745

confronting as it includes visible references to the vitality of the subject who cannot possibly be actually alive. The richly coloured mezzotint features a nude woman whose back is completely opened up to reveal the ribcage, spinal column, musculature and visible internal organs from the nape of the neck to the top of the buttocks. The seated woman glances back over her shoulder; her eyes are open, her cheeks are pink, and a blue ribbon adorns

her carefully coiffed hair. Despite the repugnant nature of the injury to her body, she is presented to the viewer in an unambiguously coquettish way. Borel states of this work; ‘the horror is sublime, flexible, elegant; the death agony, aesthetic’ (Borel, F 1990, p. 176). This is an important observation as it foreshadows the aestheticisation of death employed by nineteenth-century artists in their representations of female cadavers that subverts the traditional horror associated with death and heightens the erotic engagement with the female corpse.

Deanna Petherbridge suggests that ‘Gautier d’Agoty’s images are produced for a male gaze. Sexuality here has been taken to its ultimate, and possibly fetishistic depths of penetration into the female body – beyond anatomy, beyond ‘science’ (1997, p. 90). Here we see strong evidence of a diversion from the topos of male anatomical artworks. Whereas the history of autopsy artworks was largely based on the revelation of religious and scientific themes, d’Agoty’s sexualised female subject moves anatomy outside its traditional context in a way that is particularly influential to artistic depictions of female autopsies in the nineteenth century. Petherbridge’s comment regarding the male gaze is also significant in the context of the proposal that the female autopsy artworks created from the mid-eighteenth century on, represent a masculine construction of the female body that is founded in male fantasy rather than reality. Thus, the figure portrayed in d’Agoty’s work is a bizarre invention of the exposed and violated female body, in which the woman not only appears to accept this assault, but turns her head to invite the masculine perusal of her body.

While women continued to be excluded from active participation in

the scientific exploration of the anatomical corpse, by the end of the eighteenth century, the female cadaver had become by far the most popular subject of artistic engagements with post-mortem dissections. This dramatic change from male to female cadavers being depicted particularly informs a relationship portrayed between anatomist and corpse that now takes on a transgressive and secretive tone. Aries observes that in the eighteenth century, art began to reference 'the emotions aroused by the dead body and the beautiful victim', stating that: 'in the world of the imagination, death and violence have merged with desire' (Aries & Weaver 1981, p. 377). Likewise Jordanova describes the late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century 'phenomenon' of 'the obsession with the female corpse' (1989, p. 98).

The case of Mary Paterson, victim of the notorious procurers of bodies for anatomical dissection, William Burke and William Hare, illustrates the erotic interest in the female dissection subject early in the nineteenth century, and also the 'fearful desire' aroused by the beautiful female corpse described by Zola. In 1828, Burke and Hare murdered Paterson, an eighteen-year-old prostitute, and sold her body to prominent Edinburgh anatomist, Dr Robert Knox (MacDonald 2006, p. 34). Knox considered that the female body alone constituted the 'perfection of nature's works', and upon seeing the body of Paterson, he 'could not bear to cut her open or turn her over to his students to dissect' (2006, p. 34). Knox was so taken with the voluptuous form of her body that he invited the artist John Oliphant to sketch her before he preserved her in a tub of whisky for a period of three months (2006, pp. 34 - 37).

Paterson's corpse was carefully arranged in an erotic pose, captured in Oliphant's drawing (Figure 14), that is strikingly reminiscent of Bernini's famous copy of the Classical sculpture *Borghese Hermaphroditus* (1620) (Figure 15). Oliphant has even included the scrap of sheet draped over her lower legs, enhancing the sense of eroticism with the suggestion that she is lying on a bed, as she casts a glance over her shoulder; perhaps in invitation



Figure 14. John Oliphant, *Mary Paterson*, 1828



Figure 15. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Borghese Hermaphroditus*, 1620

to a lover. Oliphant has not neglected to draw in the dirt on the soles of her feet, alluding to her profession as a ‘street-walker’. Like the sculpture of the living hermaphrodite, (who despite being hermaphroditic, is highly feminised in this sculpture that is significantly based on images of Venus), the body is voluptuous, firm and feminine, and there is no indication that she is dead. Medical students invited to look at Paterson’s corpse also described it in erotic terms (MacDonald 2006, p. 35), testifying, along with Oliphant’s sketch, to the increasingly prurient interest in the female autopsy subject that was developing in the early nineteenth century, and contrasting strikingly with the scientific engagement with male cadavers that immediately preceded this time.



Figure 16. Gabriel von Max, *Der Anatom*, 1869

In 1869, Austrian artist Gabriel von Max created an oil painting of a beautiful young woman. Lying supine with her eyes closed, her porcelain

skin, ruby lips, flowing titian hair and lovely heart-shaped face represent a study in feminine beauty. No name is given to the lovely girl; she is not a famous character of history or the stage. In fact we know nothing at all about her apart from her obvious youth and beauty and the fact that she is dead. Behind her sits a mature male figure gazing upon her lovely form, seemingly both enthralled and conflicted. The woman's body is displayed on the bare wooden boards of a table, separated so that her bodily fluids can drain away as she is dissected. The seated figure is an anatomist, but he has not yet commenced his investigation and his engagement with the young woman's body is not yet scientific. Instead, he focuses on her breast which he has exposed by pulling down the coverlet in which she is draped. As such, this also becomes the focus of the viewer's gaze and we find ourselves in the disconcerting position of considering the sexual allure of a corpse.

Painted in Munich in 1869, *Der Anatom* (Figure 16) represents an intriguing dialogue between art and science, but also between duty and desire. The anatomist is portrayed by von Max, as mature and respectable; a bastion of society perhaps, but a hesitation occurs as he draws back the coverlet; gazes on the female form and discovers that though dead, the beautiful young woman's body retains the potency of attraction. This is a moment of crisis for the anatomist where he must decide who he is to be. Will he be the scientist and begin to penetrate her body with scalpel and saw, or will he be the man, powerless before the temptations before him, another victim to fall prostrate at the altar of female sexuality? Bronfen suggests that Von Max's anatomist 'hovers between two desires, expressed in the discrepancy between the two hand gestures – the left hand supports

the chin, and with it an impersonal, distanced, safe gaze, while the right hand moves toward a more immediate, personally dangerous touch' (1992, p. 10). She describes the 'two desires' as related to the conflict between 'preserving her as an intact object of sight, cleanly severed from him, and uncovering, breaking into this other body' (1992, p. 10). I suggest however, that the conflict in this work is between duty and desire; that while the body remains whole it continues to exert sexual power over him, and rather than being severed from him, it remains wholly, disturbingly available to him. His duty lies in his responsibility as an anatomist: to separate himself from the consideration of the young woman as an object of desire, and to view her rather, as an object of scientific exploration. The raised sheet and contemplative gaze, imply that the conflict is already resolved and that even in death, the fatal woman's sexual attraction will be victorious.

The positioning of the corpse in the central foreground of the work with the mature, male anatomist seated behind is similar to the structural considerations of conventional autopsy paintings and von Max has gone to considerable lengths to demonstrate the scientific setting of his painting. Artefacts within the room, including sections of skulls and manuscripts, reference the serious and scholarly aspect of the operation. However, the title of the work tells us that unlike the earlier 'anatomy lesson' paintings, the primary subject to be considered here is the anatomist himself, and it is his actions and the way in which the corpse is displayed which move the work outside the realm of the strictly scientific. It is impossible to avoid the fact that the female subject is quite lovely. The symmetry of her features, heart-shaped face, flowing locks of hair and creamy, flawless skin all

contribute to her beauty, but equally augment the disturbingly sexual element in the work.

A significant factor in the eroticisation of von Max's corpse is the framing of the autopsy in a dark, private and essentially intimate setting. The swathing of the corpse in white fabric and the illumination of her body also ensures that this becomes the viewer's focus as the rest of the image is immersed in darkness. It is the charged atmosphere of the almost claustrophobic space in *Der Anatom* that conveys the sense that what is occurring between the anatomist and the young woman's corpse is a covert, surreptitious event, perhaps even an abuse, as the anatomist takes advantage of the privacy of the situation to expose the young woman's breast, and gaze upon it. Whereas the anatomists in the male autopsy works discussed earlier are clearly engaged in educating a team of observers, the anatomist in this work is involved in a discernibly personal and private action. This again provides a distinct contrast with earlier, male autopsy artworks in which the anatomist and his students almost uniformly look away from the corpse lessening its importance in our reading of the work. In von Max's painting, the opposite occurs. We are invited to join the anatomist in his consideration of the beautiful, young body before him, and while his expression is inscrutable, his attention to the corpse is studied and purposeful; his is not a furtive glance, but a protracted, contemplative gaze, and whether or not the gaze is deliberately sexual, it is inevitably construed as such by the way in which it has been framed by the artist.

Whereas the relationship between the anatomist and the male cadaver in 'anatomy lesson' paintings is rendered largely immaterial by the

aversion of the anatomist's gaze from his subject's body, in von Max's painting this relationship becomes pivotal to our engagement with the work because of the intensity of his gaze and the connection it suggests. Bronfen observes of this work, that 'in contrast to the passive horizontality of the corpse, which places the dead body completely at the disposal of the anatomist's gaze and touch, his upright posture signals a form of control and domination culturally ascribed... to the masculine position of lover' (1992, p. 8). The implication of sexual interest in the female corpse embodied in the anatomist's gesture and gaze, along with the deliberately sexual depiction of the female corpse, significantly differentiates this work from the 'anatomy lesson' paintings that preceded it.

Von Max's work typifies artistic representations of the female corpse that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Álvarez describes this genre: 'the same scenes are reproduced with almost pinpoint accuracy: a table in some morgue or clinic, the body of a woman lying, an anatomist musing' (Peto & Schrijvers 2009, p. 171). The absence of observers, the 'musing' anatomist and the comparative darkness of the image, with the strongly lit central portion, all add to the sense of intimacy and the implication of transgression. This suggests that the woman is 'displayed' for the viewer's pleasure. The anatomist stands for (and abets) the viewer. He is clothed (in power) and has the rights of the spectator. The woman's agency is denied here in a multitude of ways. Firstly, she is dead and cannot rebuff the visual or physical explorations of her body. Secondly, she is supine; in a position of vulnerability and submission, and thirdly, she is exposed by both the action of the anatomist and the nature of the material

by which she is covered. This is also a liminal work: it captures both the threshold between the young woman's death and the decay of her body, but also a suspended action indicated in the position of the anatomist's hand. Will he draw the coverlet down further to expose more of the young woman's body? We know, because of the title of the work and the contextual framing of the image as an arena of *scientific* exploration, that the exposure of her breast may be only the first of many violations that will inevitably be enacted upon her body. We know that the anatomist will 'have knowledge' of her; essentially her body is to be defiled by his scalpel, but von Max has presented both the anatomist and his subject in such a way that suggests that the scientific will be secondary to the sexual engagement with the young female corpse.



Figure 17. Enrique Simonet, *Heart's Anatomy*, 1890

Another example of a female autopsy artwork from this period, which reinforces the argument for its emergence as a new subject in art, is

Enrique Simonet's, *Heart's Anatomy* from 1890 (Figure 17). This painting was shown in Paris to great acclaim towards the close of the nineteenth century (Peto & Schrijvers 2009, p. 163) and is intriguing on a number of levels. The subject of the work is the post-mortem dissection of a beautiful young prostitute (Gilman 1991, p. 108), which Gilman suggests, may have been inspired by the almost feverish interest in the discovery of the body of an unidentified young woman who had drowned in the Seine in the 1880s. Presumed to be a prostitute who committed suicide, her body was displayed for identification in a Paris morgue and a plaster death mask was made of her face to capture her youthful beauty and enigmatic smile. *L'Inconnue de la Seine*⁷ (Figure 18), captured the imagination of people throughout Europe. Numerous copies of her death mask were created and displayed in private homes and salons. The mystery of her identity and the details of her



Figure 18. *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, late 1880s

⁷The unknown woman of the Seine.

death spawned a number of literary works, plays and artworks. Her beauty, youth and the sordid suggestion of her vocation, combined with the equally enigmatic and disturbing element of death, was intoxicating for late nineteenth-century Europeans and tapped into the thematic that was already inspiring artists and authors at the time (Sorell 1973, p. 209).

In Simonet's painting, the woman's partially draped body, (the most illuminated portion of the work), is once again positioned for the viewer's pleasure. The cascading hair, the shapely curves of her body, her arm fallen from the table in a classic state of sexual surrender, all seem aimed at portraying the dead woman's body as an object of desire. The anatomist stands beside the corpse, apparently in meditative contemplation of the young woman's heart which he holds in his hand. Again the absence of a multitude of observers around the body contrasts this work with earlier male autopsy paintings and serves to heighten our interest in the relationship between anatomist and subject. Although her heart has been extracted from her body, the wound is obscured by the white cloth about her throat. As a result, the beautiful young corpse is devoid of obvious defilement; her eyes are closed, her lips parted and the revealed body appears complete and desirable.

Gilman ponders what it is that the 'pathologist' hopes to find within Simonet's beautiful female corpse, asking: 'Will it be the hidden truths of the nature of woman, what women want... will it be the biological basis of difference, the cell with its degenerate or potentially infectious nature which parallels the image of the female and its potential for destroying the male?' (1991, p. 108). In Simonet's painting the pondering of the heart implies the

consideration of the moral nature of the young woman being dissected. The alternative title: *She had a heart!* can be read as being premised on the assumption that a prostitute must necessarily be metaphorically at least, 'heartless'. Does the anatomist examine the heart of a 'fallen' woman in an attempt to discover the physiological difference that might explain her implied moral deficiency as described by Gilman? Unlike the subjects of male autopsy artworks, it is the moral impoverishment of the dead woman that becomes the primary subject of the work, implying perhaps that because she was not a 'moral' or 'virtuous' woman, licence is given to present her corpse as an object of desire, and to invite the viewer to engage with her body from a sexually voyeuristic viewpoint that perpetuates the profession she held in life, after she has died.



Figure 19. Paul Buffet, *Dissection Scene*, 1880s

A similar examination of the viscera occurs in French artist Paul Buffet's painting *Dissection Scene* (Figure 19), from the late 1880s in which

the anatomist is shown pondering the organ he has just extracted from the female cadaver. This painting also includes the young, naked female corpse and the single attending male anatomist. Once again, the corpse is fully exposed and illuminated. However, in Buffet's work the incision in her torso is very obvious, drawing attention to the organ that the anatomist has just removed. The body here is penetrated, and the wound is a red and gaping slit. The anatomist has stopped his work to examine the organ in his hand. Once again the contemplation of the excised organ can be read as implying that the source of her iniquity has been located.

Johann Hasselhorst's lithograph, *Dissection of a young, beautiful woman* from 1864 (Figure 20), also exemplifies the dramatic change in artistic engagement with the female autopsy subject. At first glance this work would seem to upset the formula that Álvarez ascribes to nineteenth-

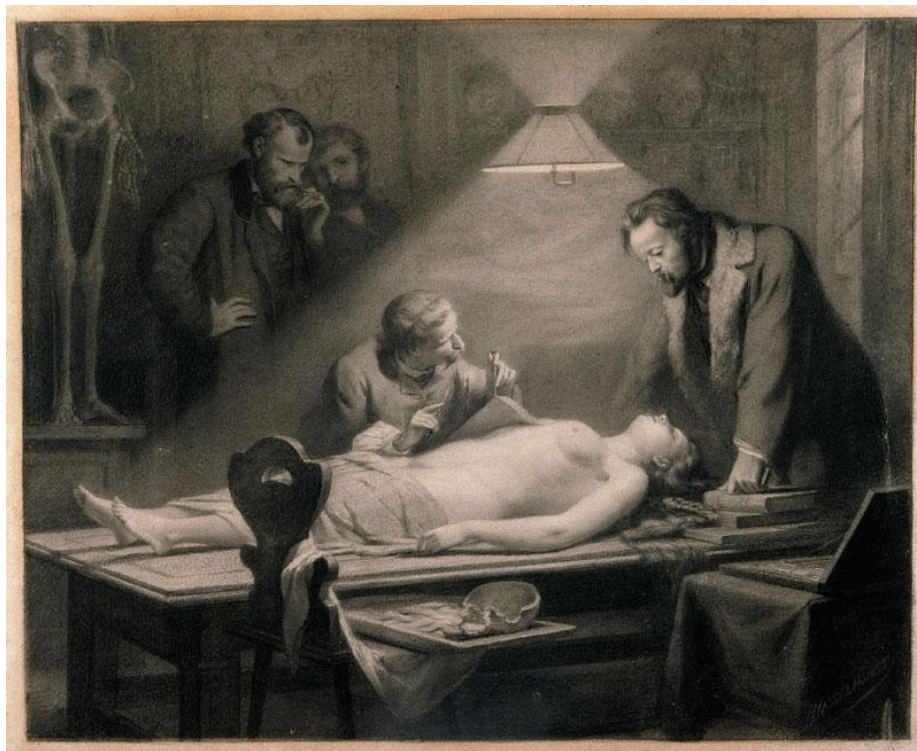


Figure 20. Johann Heinrich Hasselhorst, *Dissection of a young, beautiful woman*, 1864

century female autopsy artworks, in the inclusion of a small number of observers in the illustration. On closer investigation we discover how neatly the work actually fits the model and how patently different it is to the male autopsy artworks we have considered. The first thing to note about this lithograph is the way in which the body is displayed. Here again the naked corpse is almost completely revealed, in marked contrast to the always modestly presented male corpse. Her well defined breasts and pubic area are fully exposed, with the sheet drawn down to the middle of her thighs. As with the subjects of both Simonet and von Max's works, the corpse is undeniably beautiful with her unblemished skin, even features and luxuriant flowing hair. Indeed, the title of the work ensures that the viewer is directed to especially consider both her beauty and youth.

Once again in Hasselhorst's work, we have the 'musing anatomist' who stands at the head of the palette and gazes down at the lovely form being examined before him. An assistant retracts a section of skin below her right breast, which is not bloody and the action is executed with the greatest delicacy. Jordanova describes the peeling back of the skin here as an act of 'unveiling' (Price & Shildrick 1999, p. 165), suggesting an intimate, undressing of the female body, augmenting the sense of erotic engagement with the beautiful young corpse. However, although this site is the place of action in the work, it is not to here that the anatomist's eyes are drawn. His eyes rest quite decidedly on the young woman's breasts, again encouraging the viewer to participate in an erotic engagement with the corpse's body based on an appreciation of her femininity rather than a consideration of her internal organs. What then of the two men lurking in the background of the

work? Again there is a vast difference in the way these observers are portrayed in comparison to the multitude of observers and attendants that populate conventional male autopsy artworks. These two stand in close consultation in the shadows behind the anatomist's assistant. Their furtive, averted glances make their appearance in the work appear slightly transgressive. Indeed, we find that these are not students at all, but are in fact two artists who have come to enjoy the spectacle (Jordanova 1989, p. 98). Along with the anatomist, the two artists represent the male gaze in this work and demonstrate that the corpse is displayed with the male viewer in mind.

These facets contribute to a reading of Hasselhorst's work, despite the pseudo-scientific framing, as being less about an educative, medical pursuit than the somewhat unabashed revelation of the beautiful female corpse and the suggestion of captured, contained and possessed female sexuality. This proposition is supported by research which identifies the anatomist here as Professor Lucae, a surgeon with a fascination for discovering 'the origins of visual-cum-sexual pleasure in the construction of the physical world, that is the body' along with a desire 'to learn about feminine beauty through anatomy' (Jordanova 1989, p. 100).

Though the anatomist has reinforcements in the form of his assistant and the artists standing to the rear of the room, it appears that all are in the thrall of the beautiful corpse to be dissected. Professor Lucae seems almost mesmerised, as his hands rest either side of the corpse, supporting his body for the implied protracted gaze as he studies her breasts. The artists in the background appear to be sharing a secret conversation; the hushed tones

indicative of awe or fear, while the assistant is involved in what could be described as a pseudo-sexual, scientific undressing of the body. In contrast with the open camaraderie demonstrated in the male autopsy artworks discussed earlier, the atmosphere in this work is highly erotic and redolent with a sense of danger. Like Von Max, Hasselhorst has purposely not portrayed a disfigured and physically corrupted corpse for the anatomist's investigation but a young, beautiful, sexually attractive female body, deliberately constructing a scene in which an erotic reading of the procedure is inevitable.

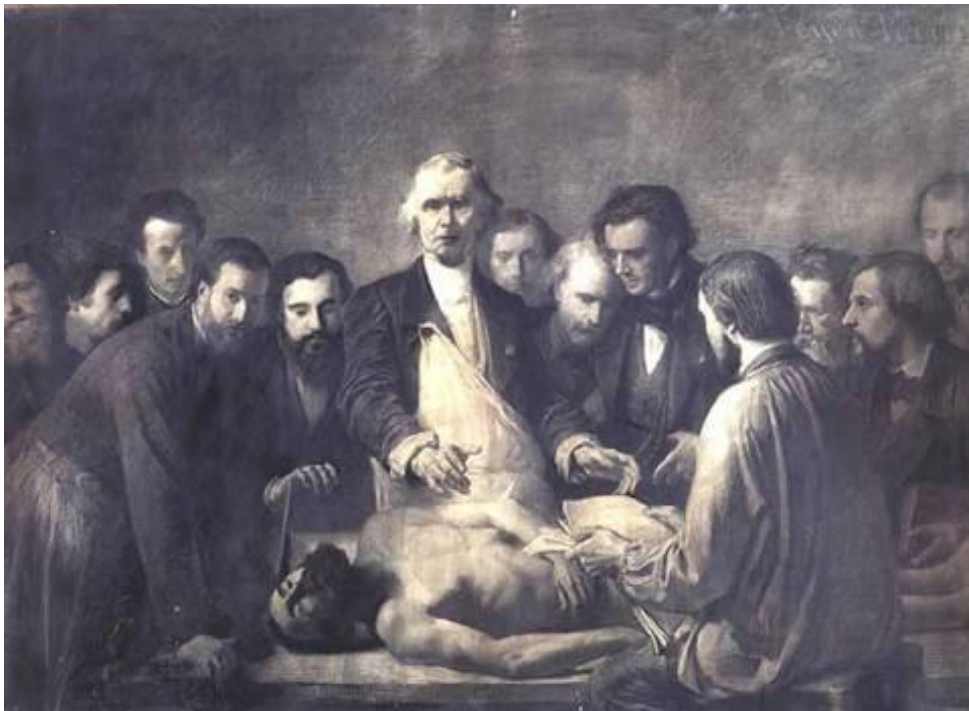


Figure 21. Francois Feyen-Perrin, *The Anatomy lesson of Dr Velpeau*, 1864

The few artistic representations of the dissection of the male corpse that continued to occur during the nineteenth century perpetuate the artistic conventions established in earlier illustrations of male autopsies. One such work that demonstrates just how little had changed in artistic depictions of male autopsies is *The Anatomy lesson of Dr Velpeau* (Figure 21) painted in

1864 by French artist, Francois Feyen-Perrin. This work strongly references Rembrandt's *The Anatomy lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (Figure 10). In Feyen-Perrin's oil painting, the title once again sets the tone of the work. The scene depicted here is unmistakably one of an academic enquiry. The central figure is Doctor Velpeau who leads an anatomy class for his students. Significant characteristics in this work include the comparatively well-lit room, the coterie of earnest and conscientious observers that surround the corpse, and the modest display of the male subject of the autopsy achieved by the strategic placement of a student in the foreground. Again, the anatomist looks away from the corpse, as do several of the students, some of whom directly arrest the gaze of the viewer. As already noted, the large number of observers in this work subverts the sense of intimacy that permeates female autopsy artworks from this period, and serves to enhance the scientific rather than erotic engagement with the body. In Feyen-Perrin's painting the subject is unambiguously framed to highlight the educative nature of the work, which again contrasts with the sexually disturbing atmosphere that is manifest in nineteenth-century female autopsy paintings.

The lack of sexual interest in the male corpse is particularly apparent in the patently *un-erotic* study for *Autopsy at the Hotel-Dieu* (1876) (Figure 22), by Henri Gervex⁸. Gervex apparently happened upon the autopsy he has depicted on a stroll through Paris and was deeply affected by the scene

⁸The completed version of this work is believed to have been destroyed during World War Two (Weisberg 1995, p. 529).



Figure 22. Henri Gervex, *Autopsy at the Hotel-Dieu* (study), 1876

(Weisberg 1995, p. 317). His primary goal in painting the autopsy was to produce an artwork of a modern subject in a realistic style, a sentiment lauded by reviewers of the work when it was exhibited in Paris in the year it was created (1995, p. 318). Gervex's painting is the only other male autopsy artwork that I have been able to find from the late nineteenth century; a testament to the dramatic change in artistic engagement with the genre in this period. Faithful to his intention, Gervex is brutally realistic in his depiction of the subject; the severely emaciated corpse being operated on is ghastly in appearance, especially its green-hued face. The genital region is obscured, consistent with artistic conventions around male autopsies, and the medical student standing behind the cadaver nonchalantly rolls a cigarette, giving a casualness to the work missing from the highly-charged

female autopsy artworks from the same period⁹. It is interesting to note how exactly the pose of the anatomist standing at the corpse's head corresponds with that of the anatomist in Hasselhorst's work (Figure 20). However, while Hasselhorst's surgeon gazes directly upon the young woman's breasts, the gaze of Gervex's anatomist rests upon the face of the male corpse.

Conclusion

While Feyin-Perrin and Gervex's male anatomy artworks perpetuate the scientific engagement with the male autopsy subject established as the standard throughout history, the depiction of young, beautiful and sexually vulnerable female bodies in nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks speaks more to male sexual fantasy than a strict adherence to empirical observation. Indeed, as Laura Mulvey observes, conventional representations of 'the sexualised image of woman says little or nothing about women's reality, but is symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that is projected on to the female image'(1989, p. xiii). This is borne out in the female autopsy artworks under examination which express the masculine fantasy of the vulnerable and exposed female body while also referencing male anxiety through their own vulnerability to the allure of the sexualised female corpse. The tension between the scientific and sexual intent of the male characters in nineteenth-century artworks that specifically portray female autopsies is particularly worthy of consideration. It could be argued

⁹Hollis Clayson reports in *Painted Love* (1991, p. 177), that Edgar Degas coached Gervex to include the attendant rolling a cigarette to demonstrate how little emotional effect the dissected corpse would exert upon a student of anatomy.

that the anatomist in these works typifies nineteenth-century European man who is endlessly perplexed, challenged and attracted to the enigma of the female form. Gillman's proposal that at least one of the motivations for female dissections at this time was tied to questions around female immorality, particularly implied in Simonet and Buffet's works, also informs a reading of von Max's painting in which the anatomist can be considered to represent the physician or surgeon assigned with the responsibility of investigating the secret of female sexuality. In none of these works could it be said that the situation represented is a purely medical or scientific exercise. Rather, it is the fascination for female sexuality that is a consistently occurring characteristic of nineteenth-century female autopsy paintings that differentiate them from their male counterparts and distinguish them as an identifiably new subject in art.

In the next chapter I explore further the coincidence of social, political and historical events that contributed to a widely held, substantially negative attitude towards women and their sexuality that excited artists and authors to characterise women as inherently sexually dangerous. Through a discussion of further representations of female autopsies, I demonstrate how the fear of female sexuality was embodied in a new genre of artworks that eroticised the anatomised female corpse and presented it as a subject that was ripe for further investigation.

Chapter two

Crime and punishment: Nineteenth-century cultural responses to the fear of female sexuality

...the dissection of a beautiful woman with her guts in her face, her leg skinned, and half a burned-out cigar lying on her foot

Gustave Flaubert

Flaubert used this colourful description of the dissection of a beautiful woman to illustrate his frustration with literary criticism in the mid-nineteenth century in France (Flaubert & Steegmuller 1980, p. 7). What was the social context in which a comment such as this had currency? Why had the dissection of the female corpse become a subject that excited the particular interest of artists and authors at this time, and how did this reflect a broader interest in the dissected female body in nineteenth-century Europe? In this chapter it will be argued that the artistic and literary interest in the dissected female corpse emerged as a manifestation of masculine desire to investigate what was viewed as the source of a host of problems that were believed to proceed quite literally from the female body. The proliferation of these artworks can be related to the increasing anxiety about female sexuality at this time as evidenced by the emergence of the figure of the femme fatale as a prominent theme in nineteenth-century art and literature. While much has been written about the motif of the femme fatale as symptomatic of the nineteenth-century fear of female sexuality, I seek to establish that female autopsy paintings can be seen as another manifestation of this trope, in which the female is shown to exercise her sexual allure even after death. It will also be argued that the emergence of art and literary

works which focussed on the dissection of the female body at this time served to assuage male anxiety around female sexuality by embodying a form of 'punishment' for the morally transgressive female.

The rise of the deadly woman: Industrialisation and the 'problem' of female sexuality

Before considering how artistic representations of the eroticised female body can be considered as expressions of a punitive response to the anxiety aroused by female sexuality, a consideration of *why* such a response was even considered appropriate needs to be undertaken. It is important to note that the emergence of artistic and literary interest in the female autopsy subject occurred simultaneously with the rise of the trope of the femme fatale. Both were informed by the same social and cultural changes that swept through Europe from the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries. Dijkstra proposes that the trope of the femme fatale arose primarily as a reaction to the changes brought about for women under industrialisation which he argues 'led to the establishment of a fundamentally new, massively institutionalized, ritual-symbolic perception of the role of women in society which was... a principal source of the pervasive antifeminine mood of the late nineteenth century' (1986, pp. 5,6). In this evaluation, a major reason for the emergence of femme fatale imagery is posited as a response to the perceived threat to masculinity that occurred through women taking men's positions in the workforce or moving more generally out of traditional feminine roles. Industrialisation saw massive numbers of women migrate to the cities to take up paid positions in the factories and mills that sprang up throughout Europe. This immediately

brought them into a state of conflict with many men who viewed the employment of women as a dangerous incursion into the traditionally male-dominated workforce.

De Beauvoir describes how the emancipation of women from the domestic sphere was met with a masculine desire to reinforce their dominance. As she observes: 'One of the consequences of the industrial revolution was the entrance of women into productive labour, and it was just here that the claims of the feminists emerged from the realm of theory and acquired an economic basis, while their opponents became the more aggressive' (Beauvoir 1978, p. XXIII). She adds that 'woman was ordered back into the home the more harshly as her emancipation became a real menace' (1978, p. XXIII). Men retaliated to the perceived threat to their masculinity by questioning the morality of female workers (Stuard, Bridenthal & Wiesner 1998, p. 312), and the 'antifeminine' mood that arose from the changes in women's roles was particularly located in expressions of female sexuality as treacherous and a threat to men's physical and moral welfare.

Prior to industrialisation, women were frequently represented in art and literature as almost asexual, powerless and weak; consumed by the needs of the family and home. The concept of women as belonging solely within the domestic sphere was largely related to their exclusion from the world of commerce which was considered strictly a male arena, a situation that was emphasised by writers and social commentators of the day who consistently referred to the dangers of women moving outside their proscribed domain of the family home. Industry was characterised as a

world of treachery and vice, into which men issued forth each morning, to return each evening to the sanctity of the home, where the wife, too fragile to be exposed to the vagaries of business, waited to restore her husband's embittered soul and prepare him to face the battle for yet another day. Writing in 1843, Sarah Stickney Ellis illustrates the popular sentiment towards commerce and the position of women, stating: '...gentlemen may employ their hours of business in almost any degrading occupation, and, if they have but the means of supporting a respectable establishment at home, may be gentlemen still; while if a lady does but touch any article, no matter how delicate, in the way of trade, she loses caste, and ceases to be a lady' (1843, p. 207).

Not surprisingly, the autonomy conferred upon the working woman by a degree of financial independence and a subsequent growing influence outside the home was increasingly viewed with alarm. Describing how industrialisation specifically impacted on the lives of women, Dijkstra writes that it 'would first drive her out of the window of domesticity... and, finally, by the end of the nineteenth century, straight into the primordial lair of the devil' (1986, p. 4). The entry of women into the workforce removed the barrier that had largely protected them from sexual exploitation by men. Nochlin proposes that most of the imagery from the nineteenth century that depicts 'fallen' or sexually aggressive women stems from the 'sometimes explicit but more often unspoken assumption that the only honourable position for a young woman is her role within the family: the role of daughter, wife and mother' (1988, p. 61).

In Laura Frader's analysis of the relationship between power and

sexuality in nineteenth-century Europe she reveals that social assumptions around working-class women generally held them to be ‘women of ill repute’ (Stuard, Bridenthal & Wiesner 1998, p. 312). Predictably, the serial sexual harassment and abuse they endured at the hands of the factory overseers and foremen was largely considered to have arisen from their own wantonness (1998, p. 312).



Figure 23. Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret, *A rest by the Seine*, 1880

Artists began depicting working women as the inevitable objects of male curiosity simply because their trades marked them out as economically and thus sexually, vulnerable. Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret's *A rest by the Seine* (1880) (Figure 23) is an example of the association between the female ‘worker’ and her assumed sexual availability. In this painting, a young laundress sits with her bundles of washing on a seat by the river. Two passing men stare appraisingly at her over their shoulders; their interest unabashed and unambiguous. Her averted face and somewhat defeated expression imply that she is only too familiar with this type

of interest. Her look of resignation suggests also perhaps that she knows that poverty may eventually compel her to accept the invitations of admirers such as these.

One of the consequences of the massive emigration of working women into the cities in Europe that particularly informed social anxieties about 'working women' was a corresponding rise in prostitution. Dijkstra notes that 'the latter half of the nineteenth century saw the massive spread of prostitution in urban areas. During no period, before or since, was the sight of prostitutes so common, so much taken for granted' (1986, p. 355). Prostitution and syphilis increased in tandem with the increase in the numbers of working women in Europe, to the point that the 'awakening' of women in taking new *paid* positions in the workforce, became synonymous with prostitution in middle-class sensibilities (Stuard, Bridenthal & Wiesner 1998, p. 312).

The reasons for the spread in prostitution are manifold, but the appalling conditions for women who entered the workforce appears to have been the primary motivation for many of them turning to prostitution as a matter of survival. Fuchs and Thompson state that 'it is difficult to know how many women engaged in prostitution, or sex work, in order to keep starvation from the door during seasonal unemployment' (Fuchs & Thompson 2005, p. 69). Dijkstra concurs, stating that 'these women, forced to choose between endless, deadening hours of back-breaking manual labour at less than subsistence wages or what was under these conditions the slightly more tolerable alternative of prostitution, quite understandably came to populate the streets of the major cities' (1986, p. 356).

Despite the fact that so many women turned to prostitution out of necessity rather than desire, public opinion quickly positioned these women as avaricious and immoral. Austrian philosopher, Otto Weininger captured the public mood around female prostitution, stating that ‘the disposition for and inclination to prostitution is as organic in woman as is the capacity for motherhood’ (1906, p. 217), while Bernard Talmey suggested that ‘not a few’ women chose prostitution ‘to satisfy their nymphomaniac desires’ (1908, p. 113).

The ‘problem’ of working-class, female sexuality became a major source of interest to social commentators, surgeons, scientists and politicians (Fuchs & Thompson 2005, p. 32). Discussions around female sexuality took on a particularly vitriolic tone. Nineteenth-century French historians characterised France as having contracted a pathological condition and that it was ‘infected by alcoholism, syphilis, and nervous depletion, all illnesses fomented by female sexuality’ (Bernheimer 1989, p. 210). Degas’ monotype *The Serious Customer* (1869) (Figure 24) portrays the female prostitute as acquisitive, brutalised and sexually brazen. The client depicted by Degas is shown as somewhat reticent and seems almost childish and insipid in comparison to the four women, and although he is the only clothed figure in the work, the power rests unambiguously in the hands of the prostitutes. One takes him by the hand, inviting him to enter further into their company, while the rigid customer leans slightly backwards, fearful of what he has come to enjoy. Allegorically this work illustrates society’s feeling about female prostitutes as being possessed of insatiable sexual appetites and exerting an unwholesome and corrupting attraction to



Figure 24. Edgar Degas, *The Serious Customer*, 1869

men that was almost impossible to resist.

Unrestrained female sexuality as captured by Degas, was considered responsible for a whole range of personal and social issues affecting the inhabitants of the major European cities of the age. Family breakdown stemming from marital infidelity was seen as a symptom of broader social disintegration, both of which were considered to be the fault of 'wanton women'. The incidence of syphilis reached almost epidemic proportions in

Paris in the 1870s and 80s, with an estimated 85,000 inhabitants of the city infected with the disease by 1890 (Bernheimer 1989, p. 235). Importantly, the effects of the disease were not confined to the working-class but were widely believed to rise from the streets through all levels of society with many women contracting syphilis from their husbands who frequented prostitutes. In turn, the unborn children of these women were also infected. The fact that an estimated twenty percent of women infected with syphilis were not prostitutes but 'faithful housewives' from all strata of society, accounts for the moral outrage against prostitution that was sweeping through French society during this period (1989, p. 235).

Alfred Fournier, a specialist in the study of venereal diseases, led a movement that aimed to regulate prostitution in Paris to a far greater degree. He used the considerable anxiety around the effects of syphilis to further his cause, playing on social sensibilities with his pronouncements that syphilis was responsible for de-population through the 'break-up of marriages, causing sterility in women, producing monsters and degenerates, and undermining the vitality of the race' (1989, p. 235). Added to these increasingly hostile attitudes towards prostitution were burgeoning but less quantifiable social problems that many believed were linked to a more general decline in morality. As Levin observes: 'The incidence of adultery is not subject to computation; but crimes of passion seemed to be breaking out more and more shockingly; while the suicide rate more than tripled during the years between 1830 and 1880 in France' (1963, p. 247). These alarming developments were largely blamed on working women, with female prostitutes in particular held responsible for the devastating spread of



Figure 25. Henri Gervex, *Rolla*, 1878

venereal disease, because unsurprisingly, ‘in the peculiar politics of venereal disease, women were always the guilty transmitters, men (and the wives and children of these men) their hapless victims’ (Harsin 1985, p. 258).

Gervex’ *Rolla* (1878) (Figure 25) is another artwork from this period that responds to anxiety within French society around the power of the female prostitute. This work illustrates Alfred de Musset's poem "Rolla," published in 1833, which tells the story of Jacques Rolla - a young upper-class *bon-vivant* - who spends his last coins on a night with the young prostitute, Marie (Clayson 1991, p. 81). The painting references the final stanza of the poem in which Rolla takes a last glance at Marie before committing suicide:

Rolla turned to look at Marie.
She felt exhausted, and had fallen asleep.
And thus both fled the cruelties of fate,

The child in sleep, and the man in death!

The figure of Rolla epitomises the worry around the effects of prostitution on men in Europe at this time. Young and apparently full of life, Rolla has succumbed to the temptations of the flesh and has fallen victim to the beautiful, young but sexually transgressive woman. While Marie takes her rest, preparing no doubt for another conquest, the vanquished Rolla looks for a final time on the cause of his economic and moral ruin before taking his life.

The gaze of Rolla on the sleeping Marie can be paralleled with the gaze of the anatomists on the beautiful young female corpses in the female autopsy artworks that appeared in Europe at the same time as this painting. As noted, the corpses in these works are depicted as if merely asleep with their firm flesh and rosy complexions, and as with the conflicted anatomists, Rolla's gaze is one of both desire and fear as he acknowledges the deadly allurements embodied in the beautiful young prostitute.

It is in this social context of general anxiety around the changing roles of women and 'male hysteria' around female sexuality (Leppert 1996, p. 226), that cultural responses began to particularly reflect a new hostility to women. The emergence of representations of strong, independent, sexually dangerous women at this time is not surprising considering the public hysteria around venereal diseases and associated social problems. The vast majority of prominent authors and artists were male and were quick to reference the climate of obsession with the sexually dominating and frightening woman. Bernheimer states that:

The prostitute is syphilitic and hysterical in male fantasies of the *fin de siècle*, and her perverse desire threatens to absorb her victims into a diseased morass. The challenge to male autonomy and power is critical: to a significant degree, modernist techniques in art and literature are generated in response to this challenge. (1989, p. 272)

As a result of these attitudes, women became increasingly portrayed in the art and literature of the time as sexually destructive; symbolically emasculating men and subjugating them to their will. Female figures of ancient history and classical mythology were reinterpreted and presented as brazen and calculatingly sexual, while the bodies of working women were regularly depicted as dangerous and sexually threatening.

'The parallel rise of the femme fatale and eroticised female autopsy subject

The image of woman as responsible for man's downfall through her powers of seduction has been a staple of Western art throughout history, but it was in the nineteenth century that the trope of the femme fatale particularly burgeoned. As Virginia Allen observes, it was at this time that '[woman's] image acquired a series of personality traits that altered and exaggerated her character from mere sin to positive and devouring evil' (1983, p. 13). The trope of the deliberately evil rather than 'fallen' woman also proliferated in literary works at this time. In his macabre tale *The Sleepless Woman*, from 1831, Scottish author, William Jerdan's dying Baron De Launaye, warns his beloved nephew and heir: 'My child, evil came into the world with woman...' (Eckman-Chatrion 2012, p. 51). This assertion would probably have hardly raised an eyebrow in mid-nineteenth century Europe, so firmly entrenched were anxieties about the destructive power of female sexuality.

Romantic poetry and literature in this era abounded with sexually dangerous women. Keats *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Matilda' from *Zastrozzi* and Coleridge's 'Geraldine' from *Christabel*, all fulfilled the trope of the treacherously alluring female, using her sexual power to deliberately seduce and destroy men.



Figure 26. Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*, 1876

One of the most prominent artists of this period whose paintings frequently referenced the sexually aggressive and 'deadly' woman, was French symbolist Gustave Moreau. Moreau represented mythological or religious heroines in an eroticised manner which emphasised their seductive power over men. Frances Lindsay writes that 'for Gustave Moreau, the

theme of the strong woman and her destructive force was one he returned to again and again' (Moreau & National Gallery of Victoria 2010, p. 35). In *The Apparition* (1876) (Figure 26), Moreau depicts the biblical story of Salome and John the Baptist. The almost nude Salome appears to continue to dance as she gestures triumphantly at the floating, haloed and still bleeding head of her decapitated victim. The sense of woman's sexual power over man is implicit in this painting and has particular resonance in the social context in which it was created.

French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans' hero in *A Rebours* (1884), Jean Des Esseintes, becomes obsessed with Moreau's painting, describing Salome as:

a true harlot, obedient to her passionate and cruel female temperament; here she came to life, more refined yet more savage, more hateful yet more exquisite than before; here she roused the sleeping senses of the male more powerfully, subjugated his will more surely with her charms – the charms of a great venereal flower, grown in a bed of sacrilege, reared in a hot-house of impiety (Huysmans 1959, p. 68).

Moreau's representation and Huysmans' description of this work both pay testimony to the nineteenth-century European characterisation of women as bewitching, 'savage' and deliberately intent on the subjugation of men. John the Baptist's decapitated head literally references the biblical story, but also in Huysmans' description, signifies the emasculating power of venereal disease.

Importantly in Moreau's work is the literal association of the sexually aggressive woman with death. While many artistic examples of the

trope of the femme fatale manifest a set of identifiable characteristics common to the women in these works, the inclusion of the obviously dead male or one who is in peril of his life, demonstrate that death is posited as a corollary of aggressive female sexuality at this time. There is in works of this genre, a deliberate association of women with death that perpetuates established conventions that through her sexuality woman is responsible for man's moral and physical demise. Many artworks from this period suggest that woman has a particular relationship with death and that this alliance is directly in opposition to men. In some she is portrayed as the seductress of death, in others, the object of Death's desire. Increasingly however, she is portrayed as an agent of death, luring men to their destruction through her feminine wiles, employing her various allurements to mask the fatal disease that she bears.

A.M. Barthélémy's *Syphilis: Poeme en Quatre Chants*¹⁰ (1851) (Figure 27), warns of the danger of the sexually alluring female. Here the beautiful face is a mask that hides the figure of death itself; divested of cape and reaping scythe in order to deceive the lovelorn male. The unsuspecting suitor is shown to be enchanted by the woman's attractions, oblivious to the little chorus of Cupids overhead who, cognisant of the woman's true identity, shout warnings that he is in mortal danger from the woman's sexual disease, while Hermes waits to conduct the man's soul to the underworld.

Similarly, Felicien Rops portrays the deceitful, seductive, syphilitic

¹⁰Syphilis: Poem in Four Songs



Figure 27. A.M. Barthélémy, *Syphilis: Poème en Quatre Chants*, 1851

prostitute and her unsuspecting male victim. In his painting *Street Corner*, (1878) (Figure 28), Rops casts his female figure as a literal ‘femme fatale’. While her masked face smiles alluringly at a potential suitor, the skull behind the mask leaves us in little doubt that her invitation is to death. Rops’ image and many like it, positioned women either in the literal role of Death or as the fatal female seducers of men, while yet another *Death and the Maiden* work from 1893 (Figure 29), this time by Munch, portrays a far more eroticised encounter between woman and death. In this work the loving embrace is strikingly mutual and the eroticism suggested by the skeleton’s leg, extending between those of the woman, is conspicuous. The

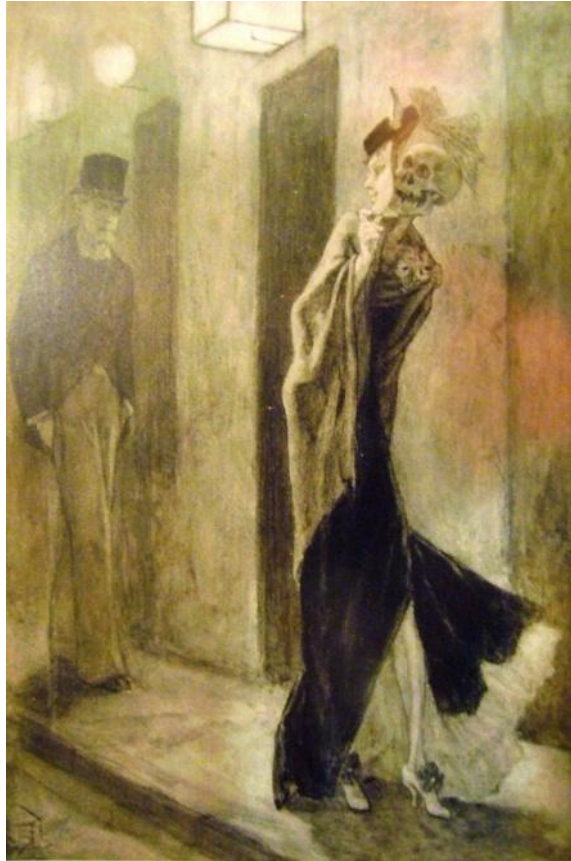


Figure 28. Felicien Rops, *Street Corner*, 1878



Figure 29. Edvard Munch, *Death and the Maiden*, 1893

situation depicted here would seem ludicrous if the naked figure was male, but in this instance, the somewhat frenzied inclination by artists towards the *Fin de Siècle* to marry unrestrained female sexuality with death, renders the work bizarrely logical.



Figure 30. Gabriel Von Max, *Der Anatom* (detail), 1869

The *masking* of death in the beautiful female face is a recurring device employed by a number of artists at this time to suggest that the alluring female face of the sexually transgressive woman hides the true nature of the threat to her suitor. In female autopsy artworks from this period, the fact of death is also masked by the way in which the female body is portrayed. Here the beautiful young corpses are depicted as if they are still alive. Age is not written on their bodies, nor is the evidence of major trauma or the wasting effects of disease. It is as if the heart has simply stopped beating while these women are still in the full bloom of youth and loveliness (Figure 30). While the allure of the corpse is highlighted in the beautiful face and body of the female autopsy subject, death's corruption is masked and the artistic convention of hiding its unpalatable fact behind the face of a beautiful woman is perpetuated.

Consistent artistic representations of eroticised female autopsy

subjects was mirrored in literary works from the same period, suggesting that the female anatomical subject was viewed as an object of erotic interest in a broader cultural context. In Turgenev's 1861 novel, *Fathers and Sons*, the brilliant medical student Bazarov falls in love with a woman about whom he exclaims; 'What a magnificent body... Shouldn't I like to see it on the dissecting table!' (Turgenev & Edmonds 1965, p. 155). The erotic engagement with female dissection is also referenced in the novel *Justine*, written by the Marquis de Sade at the close of the eighteenth century. Here de Sade describes a horrific scene concerning the planning of the dissection of a young girl by two men who seek to take 'anatomy ... to its ultimate state of perfection' (Sade & Heine 1956, p. 47). To do this they claim that they must explore the 'vaginal canal of a fourteen or fifteen year old child who has expired from a cruel death' (1956, p. 47). One of the men immediately suggests his daughter Rosalie, who is held in a nearby cellar, as an appropriate subject for the operation and the two men become increasingly aroused as they discuss the act they plan to perform.

For all of de Sade's theatricality and overblown descriptions of depravity, we see in this passage a reflection of public speculation about what happened between male anatomists and the female bodies at their disposal. This was exacerbated by sensational descriptions of sexual abuse and necrophilia that occurred within the autopsy room. Alison Bashford relates that: 'the dissecting room was a place in which gross indecencies were performed and not only by medical men. A porter at St. Bartholomew's [a hospital in London] was said to have raped the corpse of

an attractive fifteen-year-old girl in front of medical students' (1998, p. 113).



Figure 31. Thomas Rowlandson, *The Persevering Surgeon*, early 19th Century

The prospect of illicit sexual congress between anatomist and corpse was not lost on social commentators of the day. Well known English artist and satirist Thomas Rowlandson captured the social imagination in his depiction of *The Persevering Surgeon* (Figure 31), created early in the nineteenth century. In this fairly ribald caricature, the excited anatomist claws at the breast of a particularly voluptuous and apparently firm-fleshed young female corpse in the privacy of the dissecting room. Although intended to be humorous, this work captures the public conjecture around the sexualised relationship between the male scientist or surgeon and the young female patient or corpse that developed throughout the nineteenth century and became such a source of interest to artists.

The eroticisation of the female corpse in literary and artistic

representation fits within the broader cultural response to anxiety around female sexuality at this time. These works parallel portrayals of female autopsies with more conventional representations of femme fatales as they suggest that despite the fact that the women on the dissecting table are dead, they remain a threat to the anatomist and by extension, the male viewer of the works. As such, they represent something of a conceptual tautology in that these dissected female corpses can be considered to be dead, but still potent femme fatales. The conflict in these works arises because we expect post-mortem dissections to be described in medical or scientific terms. Instead we are confronted with descriptions of sexually alluring female corpses and mature male anatomists who frequently appear torn between their medical duty and masculine desires for the beautiful young female corpse before them. These artistic and literary works reveal that although logically it would appear that the sexual threat embodied in these women has been neutralised in their deaths, they still exert sexual power over the anatomist and are thus still presented as sexually enticing and available. This tension is also felt by us, as viewers of these works, as we struggle to rationalise the presentation of a dead body as sexually alluring. The fact that these female corpses are portrayed as sexually enticing indicates that the artists and authors want us to participate in the conflict being felt by the anatomist to understand that even in death, the fatal woman's sexual attraction is undiminished.

The 'harlot's body': Literary and artistic representations of dissection as punishment for aberrant female sexuality

Central to the reading of female autopsy artworks from the nineteenth century is the moral condemnation that is associated with the anatomised female corpse at this time. The sexually dangerous woman, so frequently portrayed in this period, increasingly appears on the anatomist's table where the punishment for her sexual power is meted out by middle-aged men under the guise of scientific exploration. This is particularly exemplified in a caricature published in *La Parodie* in Paris in 1869 by Achille Lemot titled *Gustave Flaubert dissecting Madame Bovary* (Figure 32). Lemot



Figure 32. Achille Lemot, *Gustave Flaubert dissecting Madame Bovary*, 1869

depicts Flaubert holding the heart of his heroine impaled on a knife as he stands at the well-shod feet of her body. The caricature alludes to Flaubert's own comments about his novel as 'anatomy' and literary criticism which he likened to a beautiful dissection subject strewn with her own entrails and with a burnt-out cigar on her foot (Levin 1963, p. 219). Flaubert's father was a surgeon and anatomist, and Flaubert boasted that he played in the dissecting room as a child and along with his sister enjoyed peering through windows at the dissections that his father carried out (Flaubert & Steegmuller 1984, p. 25).

Flaubert's description however, goes beyond the purely observational in its gratuitous nature and it is difficult to avoid the author's infamous misogyny which he expressed in his boast: 'my vanity was such when I was young that, when I went to a brothel with friends, I chose the ugliest whore and insisted on screwing her in front of everyone, without removing my cigar...' (Bernheimer 1989, p. 131). There is a degree of callousness and disrespect expressed in both quotes and the allusion to the cigar being smoked during sexual intercourse, and cast on the foot of the female corpse following the post-mortem anatomical investigation, unites female dissection with the sexual act between anatomist and corpse. The sexualisation of anatomical investigation in relation to the female corpse reifies the dead female body as a fetish object; a masculine fantasy of pliant and unresisting female flesh, but also essentially confers judgement on the autopsy subject as unworthy of respect or perhaps more importantly, worthy of abuse.

Lemot's caricature also captures the heart-pondering gesture

evidenced in Simonet's work. Emma, Flaubert's central character in *Madame Bovary*, is portrayed as an innocent whose dawning knowledge of her own attractions revealed to her in the looking glass, leads to her transformation into a sexually 'wanton' woman whose heart is undoubtedly, ultimately 'bad'. Emma's moral decay is shown to be directly responsible not only for her own suicide, but also the tragic death of her husband and the destitution of her daughter, perpetuating the theme of the social and physical danger of unrestrained female sexuality. Lemot's work may well be light-hearted and comical but the moral condemnation implicit in the examination of Emma Bovary's heart is as unmistakeable as the anatomist's censure of the prostitute's character in Simonet's later work in which the anatomist also ponders the prostitute's heart he holds in his hand.

Gilman's suggestion that the anatomist seeks to find evidence of the 'degenerate cell' in these women's hearts implies that moral censure is an essential aspect of female dissection in these artworks. Importantly, Emma Bovary is an example of a 'fallen woman'. It is this fact that both literally and symbolically warrants her dissection. The morally 'upright' woman was never the subject of dissection in nineteenth-century Europe, unless there was a specific request from her family. Essentially, it was only the bodies of society's outcasts that were made available for dissection and in the case of artistic representations of anatomised female corpses, these are shown to be without exception: young, beautiful, but ultimately 'immoral' women. As such, female dissection becomes inevitably connected with sexual immorality in which the female subject is symbolically punished for her aberrant sexuality through the physical penetration and ultimate

fragmentation of her body.

Mid-nineteenth century French author, Petrus Borel wrote his *Don Andréa Vésalius, l'anatomiste* in 1833, a work which clearly referenced the growing public interest in the relationship between the anatomist and female autopsy subject. In striking parallel with the situation suggested in female autopsy artworks from this time, the anatomist in Borel's story uses the opportunity afforded him through his vocation to interfere with the young female corpses at his disposal (Borel, P & Marie 1967). The illustration accompanying Borel's story is an engraving by André Hofer (Figure 33),



Figure 33. André Hofer, *Illustration for Petrus Borel's Don Andréa Vésalius, l'anatomiste*, mid-nineteenth century

which once again depicts a lone, elderly anatomist about to commence the dissection of a young female corpse. The female body is completely naked and clearly eroticised, presented in a similar pose to Simonet's corpse in *Heart's Anatomy* (Figure 17), with her flowing tresses of hair and the augmentation of her breasts achieved by the right arm falling from the table on which she lies. If the subject of the dissection in Hofer's engraving was a living patient and the anatomist her doctor, such an illustration would have been considered highly inappropriate. The complete exposure of the young woman's body and her erotic posture would not have occurred at all in the context of a medical examination and certainly wouldn't have been the subject of conventional illustration. Here though, the nakedness is gratuitous and specifically aimed at suggesting a salacious relationship between anatomist and subject. Hofer's illustration demonstrates again the popularisation of the eroticised female autopsy motif at this time and highlights the idea that because she is dead, the corpse is no longer worthy of professional respect, in fact she has been reduced to a fetish object for the projection of male fantasy, pointing to the moral condemnation embodied in the anatomised female corpse.

The conception of dissection as a response to female immorality is quite explicit in Zola's novel *La Confession de Claude* (1865), where he highlights both the employment of the prostitute's corpse for post-mortem dissection and the concept of the degradation that will be found therein. In this work the hero, Claude, is enraged by his prostitute lover Laurence's serial infidelities. In his anguish and jealousy he fantasises about her fate in

a vision that expresses both what he fears but also what he believes she deserves:

She would die some night upon the sidewalk, drunken and worn out. The heart told me that the body would go to the dissecting room, and that the physicians would cut it to pieces to discover what bitter and nauseous things it contained. At these accursed words, I saw Laurence turned blue, dragged through the mud, covered with infamous stains, stretched out cold and stiff, upon the white marble slab of the dissecting table. The physicians were plunging sharp knives in the bosom of her I loved so much... (Zola, E 2010, p. 146)

Zola implies that because she is sexually immoral, Laurence's body is full of 'bitter and nauseous things'. He also suggests that because of her moral degradation she is worthy of dissection. In Claude's vision the 'sharp knives' plunging into her bosom as part of the dissection seem the appropriate punishment for her transgressive sexuality. Further in his fantasy, Laurence herself states 'I came from the darkness of sin and shall return to it. You love me, but I shall never love you, for I am dead at heart and utterly worthless... you are trying to resuscitate an unknown corpse, which you would do better to carry immediately to the dissecting table' (Zola, E 2010, p. 146). It is Laurence's implied moral worthlessness that both she and Claude connect with her dissection.

The violence in Claude's imagined dissection of Laurence is a fantasy of retribution borne out of his frustration at his perceived lack of control over her sexuality. One of the most famous literary characterisations of nineteenth-century attitudes around the emasculating power of the sexually profligate woman is embodied in another of Zola's creations, the prostitute 'Nana', from his novel of the same name. This work helps to

inform our understanding of female autopsy artworks as it gives voice to the ideas around the perceived danger to society of the female prostitute and the suggestion that aberrant sexual desire was synonymous with corruption and worthy of punishment. In *Nana* (1880), Zola's notorious heroine cuts a swathe through Parisienne society. She exerts a mysterious sexual power over her victims, primarily noblemen, who leave their families, sell all their possessions, sacrifice their position in society and allow themselves to be abused and publicly humiliated. Then, when they are bereft of family, friends and worldly goods, Nana expels them from her bed and casts them aside with indifference, and they slink off into obscurity and penury or even take their own lives when they realise that they are forever excluded from her sexual favour. Throughout these various episodes, Nana is portrayed as emotionally and morally ambivalent: she is considered good-hearted but cares little for the welfare of her sexual partners and is mortified when she is blamed for their demise.

Nana's carefree and careless sexuality was immortalised in Édouard Manet's oil painting *Nana* (1877) (Figure 34) which was painted three years before Zola's novel was published but following the introduction of the character in Zola's earlier novel *L'Assommoir* (1877). In Manet's painting, Nana is depicted as she dresses and powders her face before a mirror in a richly furnished boudoir. Behind her sits a partially revealed gentleman in elegant attire. Nana turns her head to engage the viewer with her gaze, in a way that is both provocative and flirtatious. She is very much aware of her charms, but seems almost oblivious of her male caller. Dijkstra makes the point that Manet's *Nana* 'stands self-contained, self-absorbed, largely



Figure 34. Édouard Manet, *Nana*, 1877

unmoved by the concerns of the men around her' (1986, p. 140). It is this indifference that is so threatening in Zola's *Nana* as well, because it suggests that it is in her sexuality that woman is particularly independent of man. Nana holds absolute power in Manet's painting, while her male caller takes the lesser role, entranced by the prostitute's allurements. This work was rejected for exhibition at the Academie des Beaux-Arts in 1877 in Paris, ostensibly because it was considered contemptuous of the morality of the age. Perhaps though, it hit a little close to home for a society that was already racked with anxiety about the powerlessness of the upper echelons of society to resist the charms of the 'lowly harlot' and the consequent corruption of society more generally.

The character of 'Nana' in both written and artistic representation,

encapsulates nineteenth-century European society's worst fears about female sexuality; that it was a mysterious and destructive force, ungovernable and irresistible. Further it highlights the belief that female sexuality existed almost independently from woman herself; that although its source was somewhere within the reproductive organs of her body, it was a force that controlled her and compelled her to seduce and destroy. Thus Nana is described as possessing a 'sex' that 'rose in a halo of glory and blazed down on her prostrate victims like a rising sun shining down on a field of carnage, she remained as unconscious of her actions as a splendid animal, ignorant of the havoc she had wreaked, and as good-natured as ever' (Zola, E & Holden 1972, p. 453). Zola also metaphorically positions Nana as 'the fly that had come from the dungheap of the slums, carrying the ferment of social decay' and that 'she had poisoned all these men simply by alighting on them' (1972, p. 452). The 'social decay' that Nana is said to carry refers to the widespread perception that the sexual profligacy of female prostitutes resulted in the immorality of the lower classes being transported into the upper echelons of society. When she dies, Zola makes a point of revealing the corruption within her, describing the astonishingly rapid disintegration of her corpse:

What lay on the pillow was a charnel-house, a heap of pus and blood, a shovelful of putrid flesh... It was as if the poison she had picked up from the gutters, from the carcasses left there by the roadside, that ferment with which she had poisoned a whole people, had now risen to her face and rotted it. (1972, p. 470)

Once again Zola implies that the prostitute's moral corruption is mirrored in the physical corruption of her body and that the beautiful face

she wore in life was a mask that hid the filthy and fetid nature of her true character that was only revealed upon her death. His description of the pollution found in both Laurence and Nana's bodies is consistent with nineteenth-century attitudes to the prostitute's body generally. It perpetuates the idea of female sexuality as inherently corrupt and corrupting and thus worthy of punishment.

The concept of cutting into the female body as a form of punishment for her sexuality is considered by Jo Cheryl Exum who discusses historical representations of dismembered women. She writes: 'Cutting up the woman can be viewed on a psychological level both as an expression of male fear of women's sexuality, which must therefore be destroyed, and as an attempt to discover the secret of women's sexuality' (Exum 1993, p. 144). This observation is demonstrably enacted in nineteenth-century artistic and literary representations of female dissections in which the mystery of the sexually transgressive woman is investigated while she is simultaneously punished for her sexuality. As Exum continues, 'Because woman is the seductive and dangerous other, her mystery must be opened up by force' (1993, p. 144). Flaubert's callous description of female dissection along with Claude's vision of the vicious autopsy of Laurence, and Buffet, Lemot and Simonet's illustrations of the extraction and examination of the 'fallen' woman's organs can all be read both as investigations into the source of female sexuality but also as punishments exacted on sexually promiscuous women.

In this context, the anatomist's scalpel is used to neutralise the threatening female body, both as an act of revenge for its threat to male

dominance and as an attempt to reassert masculine control. Again Exum observes that ‘the symbolic significance of dismembering the woman’s body lies in its intent to de-sexualise her. It is not enough that the woman has offended sexually, by acting as if she and not the man owned her body... by having her body possessed by many men. An even more radical punishment is called for. Because it has offended, the woman’s sexuality must be destroyed’ (1993, p. 144).

Conclusion

As argued in this chapter, the emergence of the eroticised female figure in autopsy artworks in the nineteenth century reflected and responded to the same fears and anxieties about female sexuality expressed in more conventional femme fatale works, demonstrating that the sexual power of the beautiful female continues to be exerted even when dead. The figure of the prostitute or sexually transgressive woman proliferated in cultural representations at this time because they exemplified everything that was worrying society about women in nineteenth-century Europe. Changing social conditions and the rise of syphilis as a genuine social concern saw women increasingly depicted as both pathologically sexual and sexually pathological. The combination of an art historical tradition that positioned women as sexually avaricious destroyers of men, the changing relationships between men and women under industrialisation and the significant advances in clinical medicine created a ‘perfect storm’ for the artistic representation of the seductive, diseased and dangerous female corpse.

The female autopsy works manifest an additional masculine response not apparent in more conventional femme fatale works from this

time, as they also represent a deliberate effort to punish and neutralise the corrupting power of the dangerous sexual allure they embody. In many ways these artworks represent the eternal dichotomies of man versus woman and nature versus science and reveal that while men may debase, abuse, kill and dissect women in their desire to find the source of her mystery, the enigma of woman remains ultimately beyond his reach, inviolate and unattainable.

The next chapter investigates further the scientific imperative in relation to artistic representations of female dissections, and demonstrates how in addition to responding to the positioning of female sexuality as a pathological condition, anatomists were motivated in their post-mortem investigations by a desire to understand female reproduction and the female body generally as keeper of the 'secret of life'. An analysis of artistic representations of female autopsies from this period will show male anatomists duty-bound to seek out this 'secret' by dissecting, analysing and meditating upon the 'mysterious' inner structures of the bodies of dead women.

Chapter three

Investigating the source: Artistic interest in the anatomy and pathology of the female corpse

No man should marry until he has studied anatomy and dissected at least one woman

Honoré de Balzac

This chapter explores the nexus between art and medicine as it relates to nineteenth-century artistic depictions of female autopsies. Firstly it considers the excitement around the dissection of female cadavers because of what Cunningham describes as ‘the very big issues in the long eighteenth century of conception, pregnancy and the delivery of babies...’ (2010, p. 147). It was these distinctly female considerations which provided the most intriguing inducements to anatomists to dissect female corpses as not only did they represent the fundamental questions around the source of life, they also gave anatomists a legitimate reason to enter the mysterious domain of the female body. The interest in female reproduction by obstetric anatomists William Hunter, William Smellie and Charles Jenty are considered in this chapter particularly because of the extraordinarily detailed depictions of dissected female corpses they generated. These artworks, primarily produced by Dutch artist Jan van Rymsdyk, are discussed in some detail as they clearly provided a template for other artist/anatomists who followed his example but increasingly eroticised the dissected female bodies they portrayed.

The second section of this chapter focuses on artistic depictions of female pathology, a subject that also informed the medical and artistic

interest in the dissection of female cadavers. Gilman writes extensively about the widespread interest in female pathology throughout the nineteenth century in Europe. He suggests that medicine became focussed on what he calls the 'new sexuality' which was revealed through the examination of the 'hidden' internal manifestations of disease and pathology' (Gilman 1989, p. 235). These manifestations Gilman calls 'tiny time-bombs awaiting detonation' and suggests that they essentially signify corrupt and corrupting female sexuality (1989, p. 240). Michelet's suggestion that every female was the inherent carrier of the 'germ' of moral decay is reflected in Gilman's observations about the nineteenth-century medical obsession with pathology in the female body which informed the desire to investigate its source through post-mortem dissection.

Artistic representations of anatomical investigations into both female reproduction and pathology became increasingly eroticised throughout the nineteenth-century and reflected growing social interest in the relationship between male doctor and female patient more generally. The eroticisation of the female medical body is particularly manifest in the wax models produced in Italy late in the eighteenth century which are discussed along with wax moulages of female genitalia created in the mid-nineteenth century in France. This chapter also considers a selection of artistic representations of female medical procedures to demonstrate their conceptual and formal links to illustrations of female autopsies. The underlying motivation for many of the artworks discussed is shown to be related to the persistent masculine curiosity about the mystery of female sexuality which was given

even greater impetus through the medical discoveries that occurred late in the eighteenth century.

The female anatomical body in nineteenth-century science and medicine

Balzac's extraordinary exhortation to his male compatriots to explore through dissection the inner workings of the female body before contemplating marriage demonstrates a peculiarly nineteenth-century phenomenon. One of the reasons for this is the heightened interest in dissection as a new medical approach that was becoming increasingly popular at this time. Interest in female reproduction and pathology was burgeoning and was frequently tied to beliefs around its influence on female morality. Balzac's comment is predicated on the idea that through the dissection of a female corpse a potential husband will have a better understanding of how to 'manage' his wife's emotional and moral responses. Janine Peterson suggests that as far back as the sixteenth century, 'a new essentialist view of sexual difference' developed that linked the uterus in particular 'to a variety of perceived "female" qualities including sexual voracity and mental instability' (Block & Laflen 2010, p. 2). A coincidence of scientific discoveries and dramatic social changes provided a fertile environment for these theories to re-emerge early in the nineteenth century, capturing the public imagination and motivating artists to look to medicine as a legitimate domain in which to explore the mystery of female sexuality.

Foucault writes extensively about the significant changes in medicine that grew out of the enlightenment and influenced thinking around

dissection at the time of Balzac's statement. Central to these changes was the new interest in the human corpse as a legitimate focus for pathological investigation. As Foucault states 'with the coming of the enlightenment, death, too, was entitled to the clear light of reason, and became for the philosophical mind an object and source of knowledge' (Foucault & Sheridan 1973, p. 125). He suggests that the breakthrough in 'the history of Western medicine dates precisely from the moment clinical experience became the anatomo-clinical gaze' (1973, p. 146). He defined this as the new medical perception that arose out of the integration of the dawning knowledge of pathological anatomy and the clinical gaze. Changes in clinical medicine in the late eighteenth century saw the anatomical corpse become increasingly valued as a diagnostic resource due to the discoveries around pathology and microscopy.

It was not that the corpse hadn't previously been a subject of interest, it was simply that prior to this period, medicine saw no real value in examining the corpse in an effort to understand pathology, as no connection was believed to exist between disease and the lesions observable in the dissected corpse (1973, p. 126). In many ways, until the discoveries around anatomical pathology were made, the corpse was viewed as the failure of medicine, the place beyond the doctor's skill and representative of the end of medical knowledge. The primary value of the dissected corpse to medicine up until the end of the eighteenth century was in the context of its educational facility concerning the internal structures and systems of the body rather than the rich source of diagnostic and pathological research opportunities it came to represent. Earlier still, religious questions around

the seat of the human soul were among the principal reasons for post-mortem dissections, but in medical developments that occurred in the late-eighteenth century the corpse suddenly took on a dramatic and profound value to scientists and doctors alike.

With the changes in the understanding of pathology, post-mortem, anatomical investigations assumed a new prominence as an ‘objective, real and at last unquestionable foundation for the description of diseases’ (Foucault & Sheridan 1973, p. 129). The corpse came to be considered the revealer of secrets; as French anatomist Xavier Bichat, wrote in *Anatomie générale* ‘open up a few corpses: you will dissipate at once the darkness that observation alone could not dissipate’ (Bichat & Hayward 1822, p. 60). Post-mortem dissections proliferated at a remarkable pace in light of these discoveries. Autopsy rooms were built in hospitals throughout Europe and anatomical dissections became routine. The corpse represented a new and exciting arena for scientific and medical exploration and the demand for dead bodies quickly outstripped supply. Helen MacDonald notes that in 1831 the number of cadavers available for dissection at London’s Royal College of Surgeons was just eleven when at the time the college had nine hundred men studying anatomy (2006, p. 11).

The vast majority of the bodies used for anatomical study up until the late eighteenth century were male. One of the reasons for this was that science saw the white, male, European body as the standard and as such it ‘remained the touchstone of human anatomy’ (Price & Shildrick 1999, p. 28). Londa Schiebinger notes that on the occasion that women’s bodies were examined from a scientific viewpoint, the interest ‘centred on sexual

traits – feminine beauty, redness of lips, length and style of hair, size and shape of breasts or clitorises...’ (1999, p. 25). These pseudo-scientific considerations existed on the periphery of true science and demonstrate the contrast in the way that science dealt with male and female corpses and the gendered differences generally in medical imagery from the nineteenth century. While the interest in the male anatomical body was almost purely represented in scientific terms, women’s bodies were represented ‘as objects of medical enquiry as well as of sexual desire...’ (1999, p. 164), an observation patently manifest in female autopsy artworks.

This difference in scientific engagement with the anatomical body along gender lines is explained by Jordanova as stemming fundamentally from the fact that the involvement of the female shifts the work outside the realm of the purely scientific. As she observes, the masculine in nineteenth-century Europe was paralleled with culture, science, the spiritual, and the pursuit of higher ideals, whereas the feminine represented the antithesis of these characteristics being aligned with nature, superstition, carnality and earthiness. Her world is the (private) domestic sphere: ‘home and hearth’, while his is the (public) sphere of the outside world: exploration, investigation, science and reason (Jordanova 1989, p. 20). These gender tropes are reinforced in representation and not surprisingly the introduction of the feminine into artistic representations of medical and scientific procedures inevitably adds an alternate nuance to the work. This helps to explain why in representations of female autopsies, the inherent alterity inscribed in the female body confers a decidedly *unscientific* engagement with her corpse involving the artist, the anatomist, and the viewer. A degree

of sexual objectification is generally manifest in even the apparently most rigorously scientific depictions of medical interventions with the female body in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Parallel to the increasing importance of the corpse as an educative and diagnostic tool were the changes in the relationship between the doctor and patient. Medicine became focussed on the individual rather than the disease and encompassed a far broader set of diagnostic considerations. This brought the doctor and patient into ‘an ever-greater proximity... the doctor by an ever-more attentive, more insistent, more penetrating gaze...’ (Foucault & Sheridan 1973, p. 16). Indeed by the end of the eighteenth century in Europe at least, Foucault suggests that the doctor now ‘came close to the patient, held his hand and applied his ear to the patient’s body’ and was ‘thereby led ... gradually to map the disease in the secrets depths of the body’ (1973, p. 136). Thus the relationship between doctor and patient assumed a new intimacy and as doctors were always male, it is not difficult to see how this new clinical approach which brought male doctors into close physical contact with female bodies was frequently represented as sexual.

The rise in anatomical and artistic interest in female reproduction

The changes in clinical practice also saw the development of specialisations in medicine. Not surprisingly, considering the growing interest in female reproduction, obstetrics and gynaecology were particularly significant specialisations that developed at this time. This paralleled the scientific determination to reveal the secrets of the human body through dissection which became ever more focused on the female body as it was here that the greatest mysteries were considered to dwell (Cunningham 2010, p. 147).

At the forefront of anatomical investigations into female reproduction in late eighteenth- century Europe, were three particularly influential figures: Scottish anatomist and obstetrician William Smellie, his pupil William Hunter, and English anatomist Charles Nicholas Jenty. The intervening years between Leonardo's extraordinarily detailed drawings of the development of the foetus and the female reproductive system during the sixteenth century in Italy and the work of the three mid-eighteenth century anatomists represent something of a black hole in investigation into female reproduction. This hiatus was informed mainly by an aversion to dissecting female cadavers on religious and moral grounds, but also the complete lack of interest in the corpse as a source of medical and scientific knowledge outside of simple structural observations.

The rise of the corpse as a significant diagnostic resource through the dawning knowledge of microscopy and pathology was particularly centred on the female body due to its already enigmatic character informed by long-held beliefs around the mystery surrounding women's 'hidden organs' (Block & Laflen 2010, p. 2). Hunter in particular, employed post-mortem dissections of pregnant corpses to physically investigate reproduction in the female body from conception through to birth; considerations that had for centuries been clouded in assumption and superstition. The vigour with which Hunter and others threw themselves into an almost frenzied season of female dissection¹¹ represents a return to an empirical investigation of the anatomised corpse but also a significant

¹¹Hunter revealed that he dissected some two hundred women in order to complete the thirty-four plates in *Anatomia Uteri Humani gravidi tabulis illustrata -The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus exhibited in figures* (1774)

development in the artistic engagement with the dissected female cadaver.

Hunter's magnum opus: *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* published in 1774 is comprised of thirty-four extraordinary illustrations detailing the various stages of dissection of the female abdomen to expose the developing foetus within. These works exemplify a significant link between the medical and artistic gaze in relation to the dissected female form. Particularly striking is the astonishing realism in their depiction of female anatomy and the technical skill of Dutch artist Jan van Rymsdyk who created the majority of the illustrations for Hunter's work.

Van Rymsdyk's drawings, from which the engravings were produced, illustrate a dramatic departure from earlier artworks focussing on female reproduction that frequently depicted the female reproductive organs and the foetus within the womb in a naive and unsophisticated manner. Francois Mauriceau's plate from *The accompisht midwife, treating of the diseases of women with child, and in child - bed* (1673) (Figure 35) and

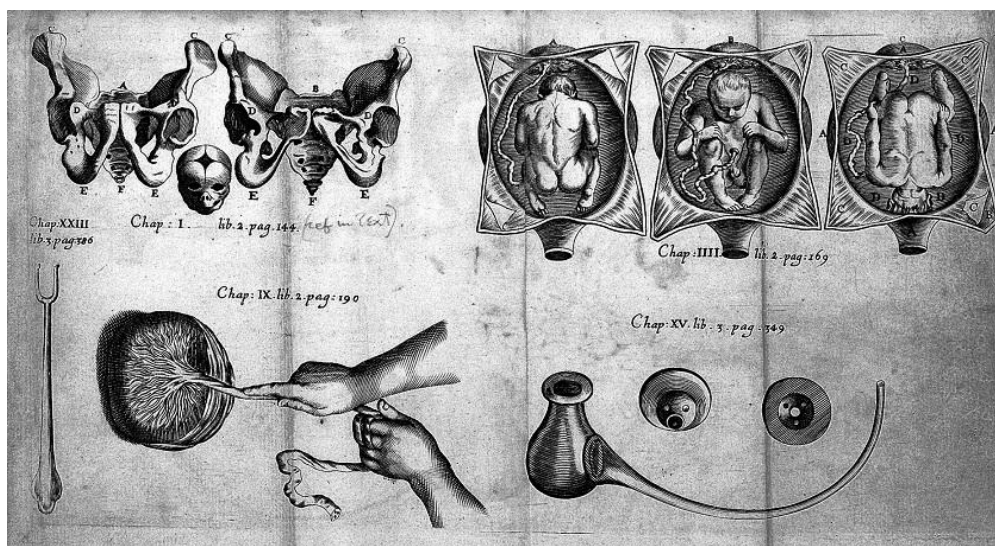


Figure 35. Francois Mauriceau, from *The accompisht midwife, treating of the diseases of women with child, and in child - bed*, 1673



Figure 36. Francesco Sasoni, *Thirteen diagrams of a child in the womb in various positions*, 1749

an etching created in Naples in 1749 by Francesco Sasoni (Figure 36) both exemplify the idealised concept of the uterus and the position of the foetus within it. The foetus, particularly in Sasoni's work, is imagined with the musculature, bodily proportions and facial characteristics of a miniature adult rather than a developing infant, while the womb is represented as a rigid and roomy chamber that houses the foetus which crouches, sits or stands within its commodious space.

It is perhaps not surprising that well into the nineteenth century much of what was believed about female reproduction was largely based on guess-work and assumption as medical students were advised, in the interests of 'decorum', to 'carry out their work blind' (MacDonald 2006, p. 20). The examination of pregnant women was done beneath the bedclothes by 'feeling, without seeing the part' (2006, p. 20). This approach and the illustrations that accompanied medical understanding of the post-Renaissance but pre-Enlightenment period in Europe confirmed the suspicion about female reproduction and the 'mystery' of female sexuality,

a sentiment that was compounded by an idea promoted by physicians in the mid-eighteenth century that women possessed a ‘separate anatomy’ which included an alternate musculature and skeletal structure to men (Cunningham 2010, p. 147). Interestingly, Gilman observes much the same reading of the prostitute’s body in the nineteenth century, suggesting that many believed that through either heredity or vocation, the prostitute had a ‘specifically marked genitalia’ (Gilman 1986, pp. 242 - 245). The eighteenth-century concept of woman’s alternate anatomy informed the idea that essentially the female body was largely unknown and required extensive examination especially in relation to the most obvious physiological differences which were manifest in the female reproductive system.

Along with Smellie and Jenty, Hunter’s focussed investigation of female reproduction was revolutionary, and the drawings that van Rymdyk created to document Hunter’s discoveries contrast markedly with the illustrations of many of Hunter’s predecessors and contemporaries. Hunter’s actual anatomical dissection of the corpse enabled the realistic expression of female genitalia and reproductive organs that is necessarily missing from those illustrations based on imagined physiologies.

In *Plate I* (Figure 37), the meticulous observation of the sectioned female corpse is clearly demonstrated. This work shows the abdomen, external genitals and upper thighs of a heavily pregnant woman. The outer layers of skin and flesh have been dissected and drawn back to expose the swollen, but intact womb. The tissues below the womb have been retracted but sit above the vaginal region, allowing the viewer an unobscured view of

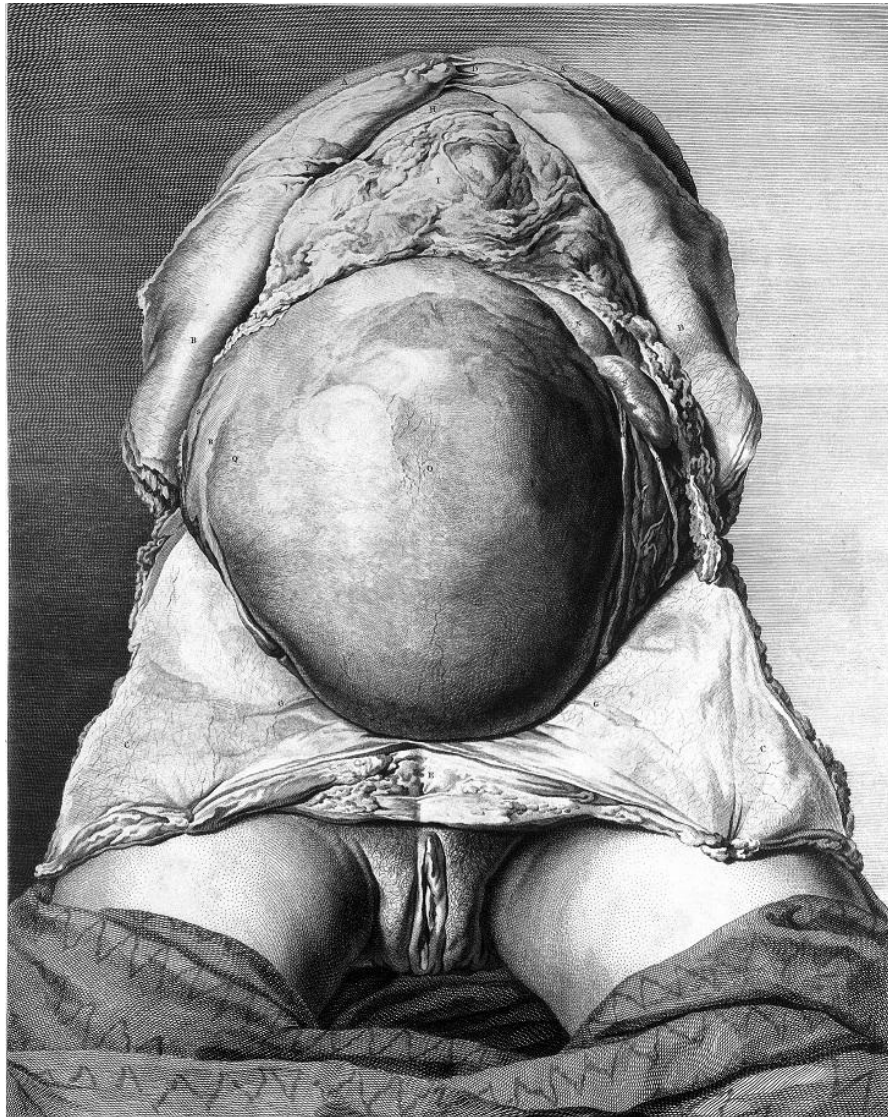


Figure 37. Jan van Rymsdyk, *Plate 1, The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, 1774

the external genitalia, which remain un-dissected. A piece of material is draped across the woman's thighs, which is strangely comforting, providing relief from the coldly forensic treatment of the body. The scientific framing of the work legitimises the blatant exposure of the genitals which would be considered pornographic in other contexts. Jordanova suggests that these 'anatomical illustrations frequently provided scrupulously lifelike detail in parts other than those that were the explicit subject of the picture' (1999, p. 185). Thus, despite the apparent scientific objectivity of such images, even

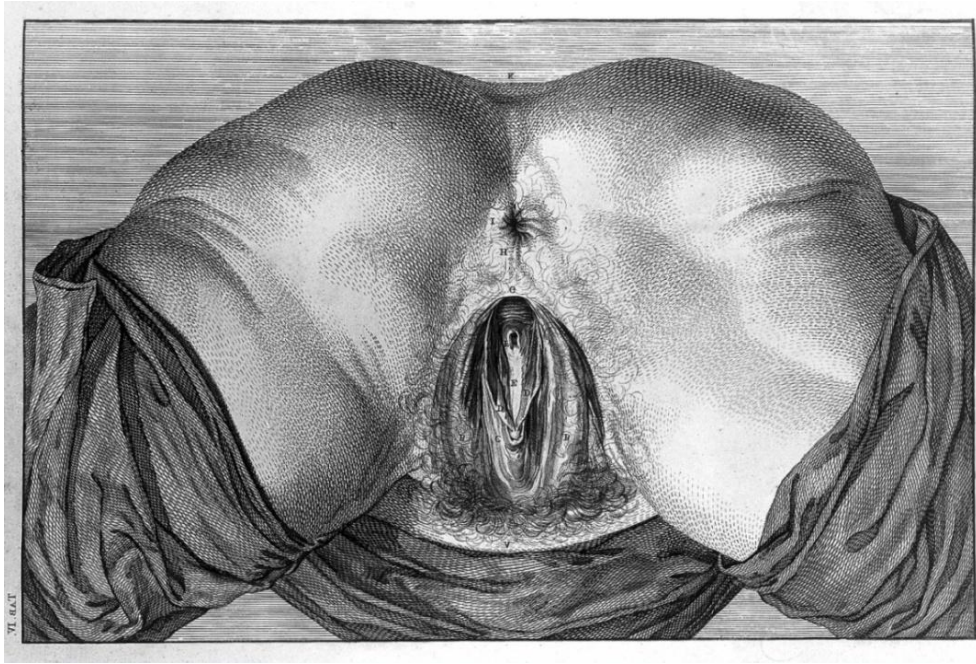


Figure 38. Jan van Rymsdyk, *Plate IV, A set of anatomical tables*, 1754

here there is a sensuous element which takes it beyond the purely scientific.

In another work by van Rymsdyk for Hunter's teacher William Smellie, *Plate IV* (Figure 38) (1754), the display of the corpse's anus and vagina is brutally unapologetic. Here the presentation of the woman's body is far more ambiguous with the draped material concealing any evidence of the actual dissection. Contextually this work appears in a series of dissected pregnant torsos so we assume that the cropping of the image is reflective of the actual dismemberment that is hidden beneath the material. However, the way in which the body is displayed and the lack of obvious surgical intervention serves to eroticise the illustration, with the draped material simulating clothing that has been removed to reveal the exposed genital region rather than preserve the corpse's modesty.

Mulvey's argument about the cropping of the female body in film as a technique that objectifies women for the male gaze (1989, p. 22), can also

be applied here. Mulvey speaks of the historical convention of ‘the determining male gaze’, which she suggests traditionally ‘projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly’ (1989, p. 19). In her view, the fragmentation of the female body essentially fetishises the displayed part for the male gaze. Applying this reading to van Rymsdyk’s illustration for Smellie, the display of the woman’s genital region for the male gaze is achieved by the literal fragmentation of her body, whereby the work becomes little more than a display of the sexual parts of the anatomised female corpse. The tradition of the almost gratuitous representation of female anatomy as a facet of scientific realism was established by several mid to late-eighteenth century anatomists in Europe and continued to inform later images of female autopsies, where the context is more dubious and the scientific imperative less apparent.

Despite the confronting nature of van Rymsdyk’s illustration for Smellie, Hunter’s *Plate VI* from *The Gravid Uterus* (Figure 39) is more challenging on a number of levels. Once again, this etching illustrates the abdomen and upper thighs of a woman at the full-term of her pregnancy. The outer layers of skin and muscle have been removed from over the womb, which itself has been opened to reveal the fully-formed foetus in situ. Disturbingly, the external genitals have also been excised to show the vagina as a gaping hole, while the thighs have been neatly severed revealing the layers of skin, flesh and bone within. The work is beautiful in its detail, somewhat poignant in its subject matter (the knowledge that the mother and child died shortly before the conclusion of the pregnancy makes it so), but

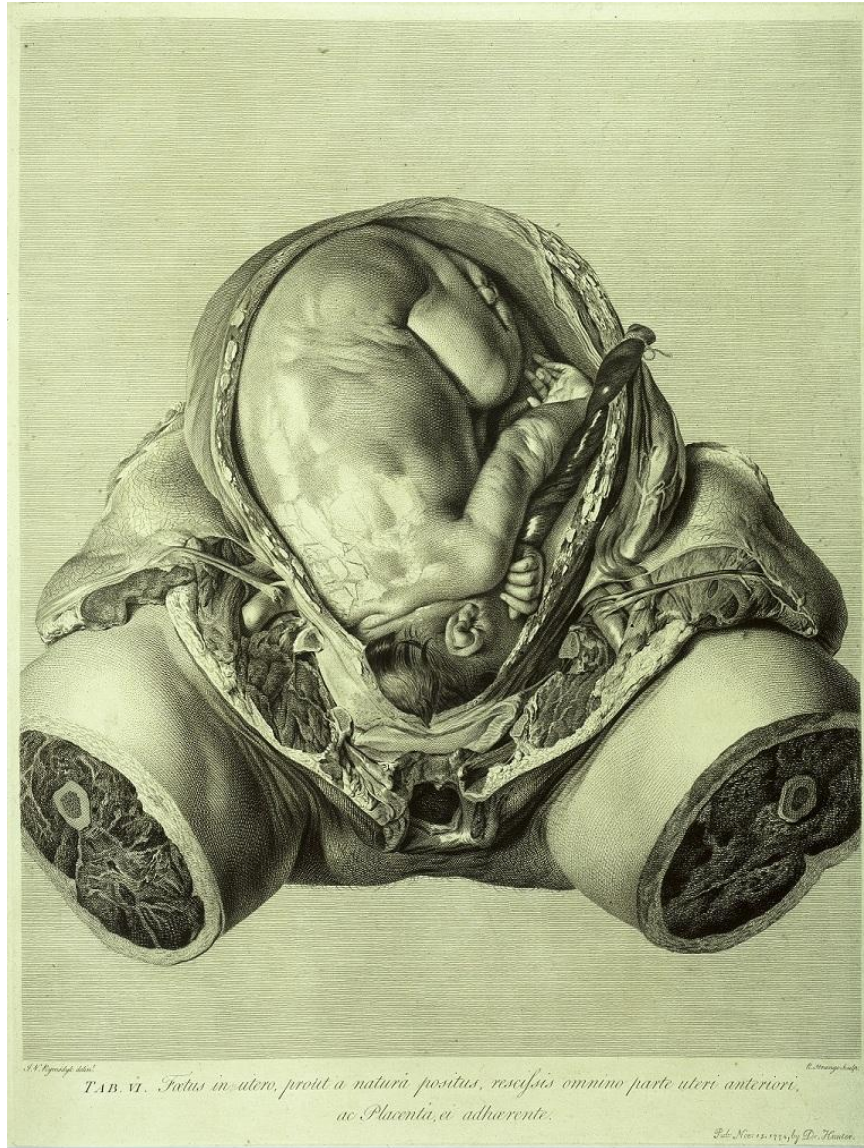


Figure 39. Jan van Rymsdyk, *Plate VI, The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, 1774

also confronting in its unabashed exhibition of mutilated female flesh. There is nothing within this image that allows the eye to rest from the features or to draw the eye away; the draped material from the other illustrations is missing here. Instead the body is frontally presented, tipped forward in a seated position, suspended before the viewer; severed thighs drawn apart. Although the baby's body is complete and undamaged, it is exposed in the torn cavity of the organ in which it has developed. The mother's body has been reduced to a scientific specimen and the display is

brutal and unnerving. The most intimate parts of the female form are not only revealed here, they are violated and dismembered, and once again the treatment of the female corpse connotes punishment in the violence that has been enacted upon it.

It is difficult to feel comfortable with these works despite the knowledge that they were produced for medical and scientific reasons and that their educative value must have been extraordinary at the time they were created. Yet the soft dimples and downy hairs on the buttocks of the woman in *Plate VI* and the unharmed vaginal area of the woman in *Plate I* lend an intimacy and vulnerability to the images that is strikingly interrupted by the violence enacted on both bodies in the name of science. Jordanova describes some of the images in Hunter's book as being 'suggestive of humanity yet butchered, celebrating the act of generation, yet also conveying violated female sexuality' (1999, p. 185). In van Rymsdyk's illustrations there is an almost obsessive attention to detail and the mixed emotional responses they evoke in the viewer occurs because of the fact that the representation is so disquietingly realistic and unabashed in its honesty.

One of van Rymsdyk's drawings for Hunter's book is however both bizarre and incongruous. While the standard for the majority of the illustrations is a complete lack of modesty and brutal realism in the display of female genitalia, *plate XXVI*, (Figure 40) is a notable exception. In this work, van Rymsdyk has drawn an open book to cover the vaginal region of the anatomised corpse. Once again the skin covering the abdomen of the corpse has been dissected and drawn back to expose the fully gravid uterus, but the exposure of the vagina is completely obscured by the strategically

placed book behind which pubic hairs extend on either side. There is no explanation for the inclusion of this book and despite its apparent attempt at propriety, it serves rather to physically highlight the pubic region and draw attention to questions about why it has been placed there. It has the additional effect of imbuing the work with a sense of humanity lacking in so many of the other fairly explicit illustrations. The viewer is compelled to



Figure 40. Jan van Rymsdyk, Drawing for *Plate XXVI, The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, 1774

wonder about what made this woman different that she should be afforded such consideration and thus encourages speculation on her individuality that augments the disturbing sense of butchery perpetrated on her body. The corpse is humanised because someone has acted with apparent humanity towards it. The book is intriguing and invites conjecture far more effectively than if it were a piece of draped material. As a result, although this work is demonstrably different to van Rymsdyk's other illustrations in which little attempt at modesty is afforded, it could be argued that the placement of the book is suggestive and confuses the image, removing the corpse from being simply a medical example. Indeed, the book ensures that the viewer's response to the illustration is mediated by considerations that once again, are not purely scientific.

Foucault describes the new engagement between the surgeon/practitioner and the human body that developed in the mid to late-eighteenth century as being a manifestation of what he terms the 'plurisensorial gaze': 'a gaze that touches, hears, and, moreover, not by essence or necessity, sees' (Foucault & Sheridan 1973, p. 164). He suggests that 'the triumph of the gaze... is represented by the autopsy... as death brings to truth the luminous presence of the visible' (1973, p. 165). This helps us to comprehend why we respond so viscerally to the excised female corpses in van Rymsdyk's illustrations. The heightened realism in his works compared to the earlier, idealised images of female reproduction, invite a far more sensual engagement with the dissected corpses that goes beyond pure objective observation.

It is important to note however, that the realism depicted in van

Rymsdyk's drawings is augmented to represent the bodies as they would have looked prior to any decomposition. The original life-size chalk drawings were made by the artist directly from the corpse, prior to decomposition, from which a team of engravers later produced the etchings for Hunter's book. Hunter also used a wax-injection procedure to give the depleted blood vessels and tissues a firmness that replicated their vital state (Hunter, W 1784, p. 56). As a result of this intervention we are able to appreciate the firmness of the flesh and the glossy tumescence of the umbilical cord despite the fact that in reality these would have become shrunken and dried if not for the procedure Hunter employed. Thus the depicted corpses become for the viewer, more than simply anatomical specimens; we can imagine the silken feel of the skin and the softness of the unborn child's hair.

As with the book included in *Plate XXVI*, such artistic mediations imbue the illustrated bodies with individuality; with specific characteristics both attractive and repulsive. It is this element that makes these images particularly compelling, as we are drawn to consider the violence performed on a body that is more than a piece of butchered flesh. As illustrations of female anatomical dissections moved further away from a purely medical or scientific milieu, the un-decomposed female corpse established particularly by van Rymsdyk's illustrations is perpetuated, conveying an erotic representation of the dead female body that contrasted significantly with many artistic representations of dissections of male corpses.

Van Rymsdyk was also employed to make illustrations of the



Figure 41. Jan van Rymsdyk, *Demonstratio Uteri Praegnantis Mulieris*, 1761

dissections of pregnant women by Charles Jenty. In these illustrations there is more of an effort to aestheticise the female corpse than in those created by the artist for Smellie and Hunter. In Jenty's *Demonstratio Uteri Praegnantis Mulieris*, (1761) (Figure 41), van Rymsdyk has again represented the fully developed foetus, revealed through the dissected and retracted anterior wall of the womb. In this mezzotint however, the body is positioned in a less confronting posture. It is turned slightly away from a fully frontal presentation and copious amounts of material are draped in folds above and

below the opened section of the body. The left breast is exposed and remains whole, and tendrils of pubic hair are depicted surrounding the dissected vagina. The effect of these additional considerations is to imbue the work with a far greater level of sensuality. Unlike van Rymsdyk's illustrations for Hunter, the corpse here is not suspended, rather it is positioned as if seated upon a table within a room; a diffuse light illuminates ambiguous skeletal structures in the background deliberately contextualising the corpse within an anatomical clinic or morgue. Although we are repulsed by the actual dissection, the rendering of the breast and thigh of the woman convey a sense of softness and pleasing tactility. The voluminous folds of material are inevitably feminine and the image overall has a discomfiting allure.

In many ways van Rymsdyk's illustrations of Smellie, Hunter and Jenty's dissections constitute a celebration of the power of science and its legitimacy as a tool to investigate that which is usually hidden. The medical context in which they were created, sanctioned the artistic representation of subjects that ordinarily would have been considered highly inappropriate. Van Rymsdyk's drawings demonstrate the fascination with dissections of the female body at the time and the growing liberality associated with subjects that were conventionally considered taboo. I also argue that his illustrations for Jenty in particular, constitute an important development in the nexus between art and medicine as they increasingly aestheticised the female body in relation to medical imagery, subverting the scientific imperative conventionally associated with medical documentation.

Some medical illustrators and artists who were contemporaries of

van Rymsdyk increasingly moved away from the scientific and into more salacious depictions of the dissected and dismembered female body. French artist Jacques Gautier D'Agoty, produced numerous engravings and paintings based on the anatomical dissections of the anatomist Joseph-Guichard Du Verney. D'Agoty's artistic representations of dissected female corpses are particularly disturbing due to his insistence on depicting the cadavers as still living. D'Agoty was not highly regarded as an artist, but was commercially quite successful (Leppert 1996, p. 143). Tapping into the interest in representations of female reproduction, D'Agoty's beautifully coloured mezzotints of highly provocative images saw the fairly widespread distribution of his self-published collections.

D'Agoty's *Seated female dissected figure holding a dissected baby* (1773) (Figure 42) is an example of the disconcerting juxtaposition of the brutal viscerality of dissection with romanticised feminine beauty that characterises many of the artist's illustrations. In this mezzotint the central female figure is seated in a room strewn with a collection of excised female reproductive organs and placentas. A womb with exposed fallopian tube hangs from a nail beside a scalpel in the foreground of the work, while a flayed female corpse, legs akimbo fills the background to the right of the woman. The central figure has had her abdomen opened to show an empty womb while in her lap lies a sleeping baby similarly dissected, still connected to its mother by its umbilical cord which proceeds from her vagina. The woman is represented as a classical allegorical figure, holding her left breast and proffering the nipple in the style of one of the many artistic representations of *Charity* (Figure 43).



Figure 42. Jacques Gautier D'Agoty, *Seated female dissected figure holding a dissected baby*, 1773

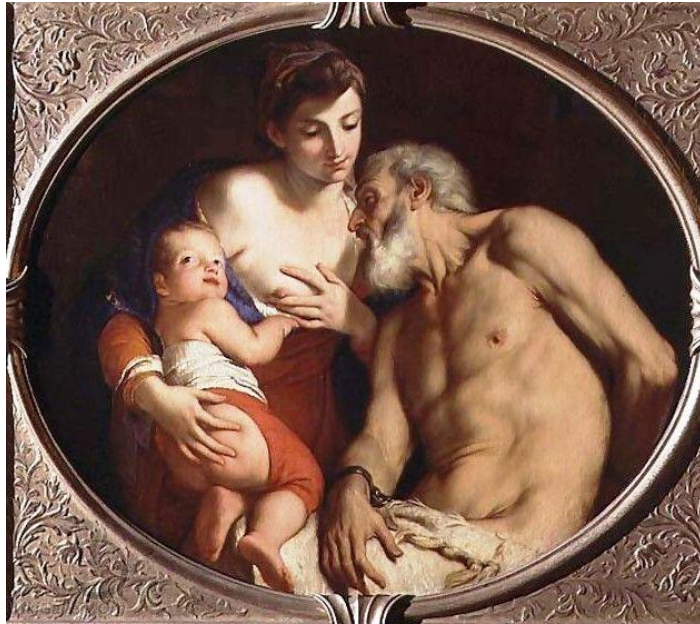


Figure 43. Carlo Cignani, *Roman Charity (Cimon and Pero)*, c.1690-1700

In d'Agoty's work, the woman's head is averted and a smile plays incongruously upon her lips. Not only is she alive, she is also patently sexualised; her averted face and coquettish smile invite the viewer's gaze, while her playful caressing of her breast is deliberately sexually provocative. These works exemplify the opportunity that the socially acceptable scientific or medical milieu gave to artists to explore and depict female anatomy and sexuality with relative impunity. Artworks that aestheticised female dissection increased from the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century. The lines between the educative and sensational became increasingly blurred as more main-stream (non-medical) artists tapped into the social interest in medical and scientific advances to produce loosely scientific artworks of female anatomical corpses that are increasingly eroticised and their medical or educative value far less definite.

Parallel to the growing interest in medical imagery associated with

the anatomical corpse was a burgeoning industry in the production of wax anatomical models. These were created throughout Europe and were frequently used in the place of actual cadavers for anatomical instruction (Bates 2008). While scientific dissections of actual cadavers were largely private affairs, the wax models were frequently displayed in anatomical museums that proliferated throughout Europe and to which the general public were given free access (2008). These wax models provoked a high level of public interest although in England at least, some of this curiosity appears to have been ignited by the erotic association with the displays, especially those produced in Italy and France. In his journal article “‘Indecent and Demoralising Representations’: Public Anatomy Museums in mid-Victorian England’ (2008), A. W. Bates writes that ‘In the early-nineteenth century the lay press had been suspicious of continental wax anatomical figures; the *Literary Gazette* of 1825 claimed that one anatomy exhibition was “a pretence” for showing off a “filthy French figure”’ (Bates 2008). One of the reasons for this suspicion was that erotic nudes were also produced by French waxwork-makers along with wax moulages of female genitalia. Thus when English exhibitors described wax anatomical exhibitions as “French”, there was an intentional hint that a certain ‘continental naughtiness’ was on display (Bates 2008).

The wax medical models often achieved a high level of realism in the depiction of skin, muscle and bodily organs. Interestingly, Mary Hunter suggests that the medium of wax was often ‘understood in gendered terms’ (2008, p. 43). Hunter describes how because of its fragility, wax was frequently linked to femininity and death. As she states: ‘... it is evident that

the medium was considered the perfect material for the rendering of female bodies in medical contexts: bodies that fluctuated between the real and the ideal, sickness and health, education and entertainment, sentience and unconsciousness, beauty and horror' (2008, p. 43). The simulacrum of the human body achieved in many of these life-size wax models often epitomised the 'beauty and horror' that Hunter comments on and the display of beautiful, naked and alluring female wax anatomical models in public museums contributed to the popularisation of the motif of the eroticised female autopsy subject.

The sexualisation of the female anatomical body is particularly apparent in the 'Wax Venuses': life-size anatomical models of demountable bodies produced in northern Italy late in the eighteenth century. Artisans working within La Specola Museum in Florence created wax models of both



Figure 44. Clemente Susini, *Anatomical Venus*, Wax Model (detail), late 18th century

male and female bodies for the purpose of demonstrating the characteristics and position of bodily organs. Many of these models were sent as educational aids to universities and museums around Europe (Jordanova 1989, p. 44). Although not intended as aesthetic objects, the way in which they were made and displayed undoubtedly influenced later artistic representations of anatomical bodies, especially those of female corpses.

There is an undeniable sensuality expressed in the positioning and embellishing of the female models in particular (Figure 44). The coloured wax used was particularly effective in reproducing the appearance of human skin and flesh. As Jordanova comments ‘... the use of wax to imitate flesh produces texture, and colour, which eerily resemble the ‘real thing’ (1989, p. 45). The almost mimetic reproduction of human tissue achieved by the material is enhanced by the addition of individually applied (human) eyelashes, eyebrows, head and pubic hair. These models were made to be dissembled in order to view the flesh and organs beneath the skin; however it is only the female anatomical models that can be completely reassembled. The male models are either flayed or incomplete, whereas some of the female models can be viewed *in toto*, with flowing tresses and occasionally even adorned with a string of pearls around the neck (Figure 45). The female models (significantly known as ‘Venuses’) lie with their heads tilted back with painted lips parted in imitation of sexual ecstasy. Jordanova describes the female waxes as ‘knowingly erotic’ (1989, p. 50), stating that ‘the figures of recumbent women seem to convey, for the first time, the sexual potential of medical anatomy’ (Price & Shildrick 1999, p. 164). The contrast between the eroticisation of the male and female waxes



Figure 45. Clemente Susini, *Anatomical Venus*, Wax Model, late 18th century

is once again quite distinct. As with seventeenth and eighteenth-century paintings of male post-mortem dissections, the engagement with the wax male anatomical body is far more scientific. While the erotic posing of the full-body female waxes along with the embellishments of jewellery and pubic hair enhance their sexual allure, the male waxes are excused from an erotic reading by the dehumanising effect of the absence of skin or the representation of only partial or incomplete bodies (Figure 46).

The male wax models invite a logical and reasoned scientific enquiry, while the female body encourages the viewer to consider her sexuality and her attractiveness. As such, the wax ‘Venuses’ constitute another important link in the consideration of the eroticisation of the anatomised female corpse in artistic representation. Their widespread distribution throughout European hospitals and museums meant that unlike van Rymsdyk’s etchings, their exposure extended beyond the medical and scientific community and into the public domain. The referencing of earlier classical representations of Venus or Bernini’s *Saint Therese* (Figures 47 & 48) inevitably results in an artistic engagement with these works despite the fact that they were created primarily as medical models. The difference of course is that the religious ‘ecstasy’ referenced in Bernini’s sculpture now takes on a far more ambiguous reading especially as the anatomical models



Fig. 46. Clemente Susini, *Male Wax Model*, late 18th century



Figure 47. Clemente Susini, *Anatomical Venus* (detail), late 18th century



Figure 48. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (detail). 1647–1652



Figure 49. Clemente Susini, *Anatomical Venus* (detail), late 18th century

seem to exist in a curiously liminal state, hovering between life and death.

The wax medium, with its glistening viscosity combined with the lifelike poses of many of Susini's models, evokes an uneasy sense of dissonance in the viewer. The alluring corpse with her entrails spilling from her body (Figure 49) is a nightmarish vision from Poe or Shelley. The model invites erotic appraisal with her thrown back head and parted lips while she coquettishly plays with a braid of hair, but the mess of intestines and organs strewn across her abdomen is incongruous with sexual attraction and is reminiscent of d'Agoty's works produced in France during the same period. Like d'Agoty's mezzotints, Susini's wax models, while ostensibly medical artefacts, marry the implication of eroticism or sexual availability with the blatant display of dismemberment and the inevitable intimation of death.



Figure 50. Pierre Spitzner, *Wax Model of woman undergoing caesarean section*, late 19th century

A later wax model explicitly connects the anatomised female body with masculine scientific exploration in a decidedly erotic manner. This work shows a female patient undergoing a caesarean section (Figure 50). The woman lies with her legs tied together and arms fastened above her head. She is fully clothed, although an opening has been made to reveal her dissected womb and genitalia. Exhibited in Paris by the self-proclaimed Dr. Pierre Spitzner in the late nineteenth century, this work includes the disembodied hands of two surgeons to demonstrate their position during the operation. The surgeons' hands extend from suit cuffs, showing that they are

male, and although their position on the woman's body are designed to replicate a medical procedure they are also inevitably read as sexual, especially the lower central hand holding an instrument, with extended finger directly in contact with the woman's vagina. Whereas Susini's wax models appear to be sleeping, Spitzner's figure is portrayed as awake and wearing an expression of strong apprehension if not terror. The hands on her sides restrain her as do the bonds on her ankles and we understand the need to have her contained during the operation. However, the sexual tension in the work is undeniable and disturbing as the horrified woman is held in place by male hands while she is examined in an extremely intimate manner.

As a medical object, the wax figure here is blatantly sexualised. The depicted body is immobilised, partially undressed and penetrated by male hands. It is particularly important to note that this work, unlike the earlier wax models and illustrations of anatomised female bodies, introduces the idea of physical contact between male surgeon or anatomist, and female body. Thus the relationship between male professional and female patient becomes central to the reading of the work. Elizabeth Stephens suggests that the clothing on this model, in contrast to the convention of naked wax medical models, serves to 'intensify the significance of the penetrated, exposed body of this Venus...' (Fisher & Toulalan 2011, p. 97). Her gaze is directed at her abdomen where hands restrain her and touch her genital area, and as with female autopsy paintings from this period, the medical tenor of the work is imbued with a sense of male fantasy as the exposed and defenceless female body is explored.

The sexualisation of female pathology in artistic representation

Wax was also used to create models that detailed pathological conditions affecting female genitalia. In the late nineteenth century, French surgeon Jules-Emile Péan along with Doctor Alfred Fournier, produced numerous wax moulages of diseased female genitals which were ultimately exhibited at the Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris. Hunter describes *Péan's* moulages as artistic representations despite their primary medical utility as educational artefacts (2008, p. 46). This is because of the aesthetic augmentation of the casts by the addition of pigments and insertion of hairs into the wax to increase their realism. The mark of the surgeon is referenced in the creation of the moulages by their personal preference for the type and amount of augmentation and the addition of their signature on the mount below the cast. Hunter also makes the significant point that the actual production of the moulages required essentially non-medical physical contact between the doctor and the patient through the application of wax to the area to be cast as demonstrated in Félicien Rops' somewhat suggestively titled *La naissance de Vénus*¹², (1878) (Figure 51). In this image the young, naked female model is having wax applied directly to her genital area by the doctor for the creation of the moulage. In some of the completed casts (Figures 52 & 53), the surgeon's own fingers form part of the moulage as they retract the labia to demonstrate the effects of syphilis on the external female genitalia. As with Spitzner's wax model of the patient undergoing a caesarean section (Figure 50), the action of the surgeon captured here is

¹²The birth of Venus

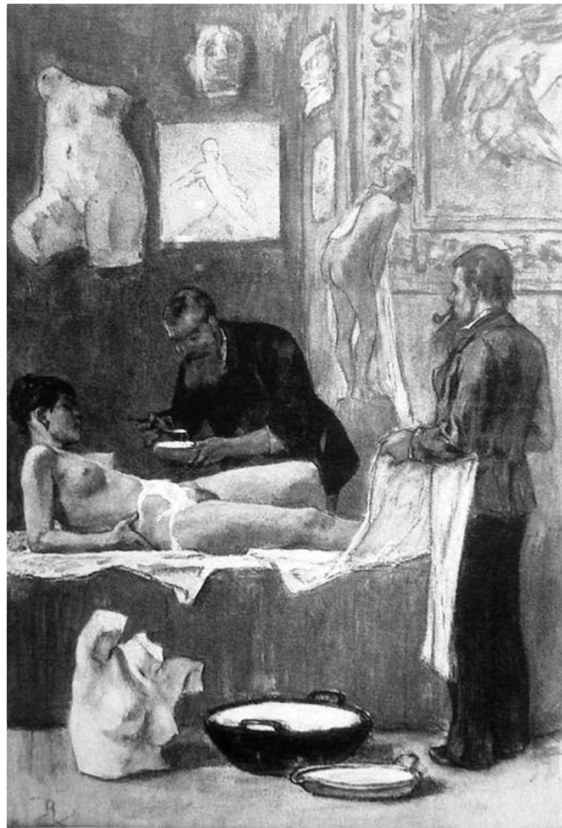


Figure 51. Félicien Rops, *La naissance de Vénus*, 1878



Figure 52. *Syphilide ulcéreuse de la vulve*, Wax Moulage, late 19th Century



Figure 53. *Chancre syphilitique de l'entrée du vagin*, Wax Moulage, late 19th Century

unavoidably sexual and the moulages again demonstrate the ambiguity of 'medical' models that teeter between scientific artefacts and artworks, and reflect the eroticisation of artistic engagements with female sexual pathology at this time. Additionally, as Rops' work demonstrates, they also exemplify social perceptions around the sexualised nature of the relationship between female patients and doctors. In particular, the sexualised interaction between a mature, clothed male doctor and a nubile and naked young woman, as exemplified in Rops' painting, significantly echoes the artistic depiction of female autopsies late in the nineteenth century.

The production of these moulages occurred at the same time as the expression of the need to identify the source of women's corrupt behaviour in pathologies of the body. 'Just dissect' wrote French historian, Jules Michelet in *La Femme* (1860), 'in a moment you will understand and feel everything' (Michelet & Palmer, p. 47). In *L'amour* (1860), Michelet wrote that 'the purest, most virtuous woman... has a germ in the blood... which sooner or later will betray itself' (p. 254). This contention centred around his suggestion that the moral corruption evident in nineteenth-century European society was directly related to the decline in the incidence of marriage or the postponing of marriage to later in life (1860, pp. 8,9). Michelet believed these conditions contributed to the abnormal function of the womb that in turn gave rise to degenerate female morality, which could be revealed through the dissection of the female corpse. There is a strange relationship between the metaphorically and pathologically corrupt female body in Michelet's suggestion that also exists in female autopsy artworks

created at this time: the proposition that examination of the dead female body could reveal the source of treacherous female sexuality. Likewise, Michelet implied that sexual transgression gave rise to a pathological condition in women that could be literally discovered within the body of the immoral woman.

Fears around the socially corruptive power of female sexual disease were so profound that first in France, then in England and throughout the whole of Europe, governments passed what were known as ‘Contagious Disease Acts’ in the middle of the nineteenth century. These laws required the registration of all female prostitutes and a fortnightly, physical examination of ‘the vulva, the vagina, the neck of the womb, the lips, and the inside of the mouth’ (Corbin 1990, p. 96). These procedures were aimed at detecting the evidence of venereal disease and were carried out in doctor’s rooms where prostitutes lined up and were unceremoniously examined in each other’s presence.

Artists found a rich source of material in the idea of the sexualised medical relationship between doctor and patient, and equally, the association between female pathology and sexuality. French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec frequently created works that focussed on prostitutes who worked in the area of Montmartre in Paris where he lived. The gynaecological examinations became such a regular and hated part of the prostitute’s life that they appealed to Lautrec as a subject worthy of artistic documentation. In his work *Rue des Moulins* (1894) (Figure 54), Lautrec depicts the dehumanising medical examinations with surprising empathy.



Figure 54. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Rue des Moulins*, 1894

The two women lining up to be examined wear expressions of resigned acquiescence as they prepare to submit to the humiliating semi-public gynaecological examination. Naked below their hitched up shifts apart their black-stockinged lower legs, the women glumly await their turn. The exposure of intimate flesh here is demeaning and pathetic and the moral condemnation inherent in these fortnightly rituals is reflected in the



Figure 55. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *The Sofa*, 1894

women's downcast eyes and stooped stances. The bright red hair of the woman at the front and the flushed and mottled complexion of the second woman, are both common external manifestations of syphilis, demonstrated even more clearly in another of Lautrec's paintings *The Sofa* (1894) (Figure 55). The garish hue of syphilis seems to infect the whole of *Rue des Moulins* giving the painting a sense of fever and corruption. The severe staccato brush strokes with which the walls and floor are rendered and the hastily sketched retreating figure in the right background, reference the lack of care afforded the women undergoing the procedure. In this work, Lautrec captures the sexual objectification of female prostitutes in the popular imagination. The subjection of the sexually deviant woman to the male doctor epitomises the sexualisation of the doctor/patient relationship popularly conceived in nineteenth-century European society. The apparent

sexual disease of Lautrec's prostitutes also references the social antipathy towards women of ill repute and their inevitable association with sexual degradation and danger to society.

Although we may not immediately recognise the significance of these works to the female autopsy paintings that were being made at the same time, the contextual links between the two genres are important. Both evolved out of the combination of three specific elements that are characteristic of the time in which they were made. Firstly, the scientific obsession with discovering the hidden cause of illness and disease informed the artistic interest in recording the medical intervention with the body. Secondly, the characterisation of the female body in particular as the primary locus of the types of diseases that were devastating Europe saw artists likewise focus on the sexualised female body to illustrate social fears around the perceived links between female sexuality and pathology. Finally, both genres illustrate the masculine interference with the female body in which science is represented in the male doctor or anatomist and aberrant female sexuality is illustrated in the sexually reified female prostitute or corpse.

Conclusion

An analysis of medical imagery from the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries in Europe, demonstrates the evolution of an ever more eroticised engagement with the medicalised female body. The interest in female reproduction and pathology in the late eighteenth century inspired a significant increase in the number of female dissections by obstetric anatomists which provided a rich source of material for medical illustrators

at this time. The illustrations of these dissections, which were primarily produced for scientific documentation, nevertheless manifest characteristics that mark them out as being created for a particularly male gaze and subsequently fired the imagination of artists working outside the medical field who used the guise of scientific enquiry to produce increasingly sexualised representations of dissected and diseased female bodies. By the late nineteenth century this trope took on a life of its own outside the scientific milieu in which it was generated. Along the way it had accumulated a host of additional considerations informed by the rise in prostitution and the corresponding increase in the incidence of syphilis which ultimately saw the dissected female body become synonymous with heightened sexuality, disease and moral degeneracy. Additionally, the perception of the sexualisation of the doctor/patient relationship had significant bearing on the artistic representation of female autopsies and can be traced directly to the dramatic changes in clinical practice that occurred at this time.

The next chapter demonstrates how the nineteenth-century, European artistic trope of the eroticised female autopsy subject extended far beyond the context in which it emerged. It will show how some artists used the aesthetic characteristics of the nineteenth-century works to pay tribute to the motif, while others perpetuated the fantasy of punishment of transgressive female sexuality by continuing to objectify, dissect and dismember the female body. Evidence of the influence of the trope will be discussed in a variety of artistic examples including early twentieth-century photographic works created in North America, *Lustmord* paintings from the Weimar

republic and Surrealist artist, Hans Bellmer's dismembered, abused and reassembled dolls.

Chapter four

Dissected and dismembered: The perpetuation of the eroticised female autopsy subject in twentieth-century artistic representations

I don't particularly want to chop up women but it seems to work

Brian de Palma

The exceptional artistic interest in female anatomy manifest in representations of the eroticised, dissected female corpse in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, can be demonstrated to have a currency that has extended far beyond the context in which it emerged. Despite the idiosyncratic social, medical and artistic influences that informed the emergence of the trope, the human fascination with death and female sexuality is perennial and as such it remains a fertile field for artistic exploration. While early twentieth-century depictions of the dissected and dismembered female corpse continued to manifest many of the characteristics of the trope that emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were also circumstances peculiar to the first part of the twentieth century that influenced the way in which the female corpse was represented; in particular, male fears about newly empowered women following the First World War and the rise in the contraction of syphilis by returned soldiers. This chapter demonstrates how a range of male artists from diverse geographical and cultural contexts have been moved to employ facets of the trope in their work, thereby effectively perpetuating the artistic fantasy associated with the dissected female body in the twentieth century.

The chapter begins by analysing the continuation of aesthetic interest

in the female autopsy subject expressed by artists working in North America in the early twentieth century who responded almost mimetically to the formal qualities of nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks. These works are particularly referential of the characteristics of the nineteenth-century works they imitate despite the fact that the social and cultural conditions from which they emerged were no longer particularly relevant in the context of twentieth-century North America.

A re-emergence of many of these conditions in the Weimar Republic in Germany saw the advent of a large number of artworks that once again focussed on the dismembered female body. These are considered in the second section of this chapter as artists reacted to a society that had been brutalised and desensitised by the experience of war to produce an extraordinary number of works in which female victims of sexual murder are violently mutilated in an intriguing and challenging employment of the trope of the dissected female subject. Artists George Grosz and Otto Dix are particularly discussed here as their numerous *Lustmord* works belie personal anxieties about the female body as well as allegorising the brutality and horror of war.

Finally, the dismembered *Poupées* of Surrealist artist Hans Bellmer are discussed to demonstrate that the male sexual fantasies that inspired the original artistic trope of the eroticised and dissected female body continued to find expression in the works of artists working in the twentieth century, far from the geographic and social context in which it first came to light.

Early twentieth-century homages to the artistic trope of the eroticised female autopsy subject

The eroticised female autopsy subject occurred so frequently in medical imagery, paintings, caricatures and literary works, that by the end of the nineteenth-century it could almost have been considered a cliché. As the effects of industrialisation on changing gender roles became less acute and the excitement about anatomical dissection waned, the creation of artworks that responded to these factors likewise became less common. However, the widespread distribution of this imagery through publication in journals and the production and dissemination of postcards¹³ ensured that the idea of the trope moved beyond Europe and outside the traditional media in which it began. Early in the twentieth century, artworks began to appear in North America that mimicked the formal and conceptual considerations of their earlier European types. Although the social factors that contributed to the original fascination with the eroticised female anatomical body were not especially germane in the North American cultural context, the aesthetic imitation of the European artworks from which they are derived is striking and so precise that they can be considered homages to the works that they reference.

One such example was created by American anatomist John Wilkes Brodnax, in Virginia in 1924. Titled *The Anatomist*, (Figure 56), the similarities between von Max's painting *Der Anatom* (Figure 16), and this

¹³Postcards of both von Max's *Der Anatom* and Simonet's *Heart's Anatomy* were produced and distributed internationally in the late 19th century. The author owns original examples of each.



Figure 56. John Wilkes Brodnax, *The Anatomist*, 1924

work are so marked as to be beyond mere coincidence, and there is little doubt that Brodnax was strongly influenced by von Max's work (Jordanova 1989, p. 101). In this drawing the beautiful, young female corpse with the cascading hair in the diaphanous gown is instantly familiar, as is the singular seated anatomist gazing upon the dead but as yet, unblemished body. The references to the works of both von Max and Simonet are unmistakable. In a poem written for the yearbook of the college at which he taught, Brodnax buys into the fantasy of the dissection of the beautiful, young female corpse:

*This comely maiden, once buoyant in life.
By the dread hand of disease expires,
Is now subject to the dissector's knife.
To carve and mutilate as he desires.*

John Wilkes Brodnax¹⁴

¹⁴*The X-Ray*, 1926 (p. 144, Vol. 13, The Medical College of Virginia Yearbook)

The implication in the final line of this stanza of the poem plays with the idea that the anatomist is motivated not by a desire for scientific knowledge when the subject of the autopsy is a ‘comely maiden’. Rather it is the opportunity to ‘carve and mutilate’ the beautiful body before him; a significant reference to earlier autopsy artworks. Brodnax’s work self-consciously perpetuates the idea that the investigation of the beautiful, young female corpse by the male anatomist operates outside the conventional medical context of the autopsy in artistic and literary representation. Brodnax was also the author of two short books on the links between art and anatomy and would have been aware of the historical tradition of the eroticisation of the female autopsy subject in artistic representation (SNAC 2013).

In *The Anatomist*, as in the works of the nineteenth-century artists discussed previously, the ambiguous relationship between the anatomist and the female corpse is the primary focus of the work, rather than the scientific procedure depicted. Although fears around the spread of syphilis and the emasculating nature of female sexuality that informed the original iterations of the trope were not particularly evident in early twentieth-century North America, by making the work a self-portrait, Brodnax acknowledges that the sexual tension, so demonstrably suggested in earlier female autopsy works, was still a pertinent concern that existed for him in the literal experience of female dissection. Indeed, the ‘fearful desire’ expressed as an erotic fantasy of a transgressive relationship between anatomist and corpse in von Max and Simonet’s work, is here given both voice and volume in the gaze of Brodnax himself.

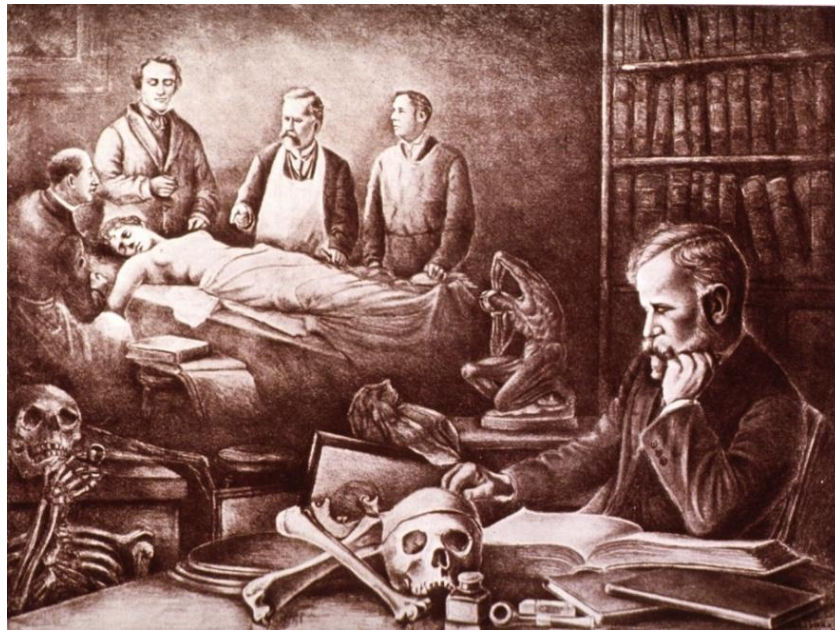


Figure 57. John Wilkes Brodnax, *Only a Dream*, 1922

Another work by Brodnax, *Only a Dream* (1922) (Figure 57), again references the validity of the trope of female dissection as an expression of male sexual fantasy. In this work, Brodnax sits in the right foreground; eyes closed, head resting on his hand, engaged in a daydream. It is the dream image that fills the majority of the left portion of the painting. Here a voluptuous and partially naked, young, female corpse lies on an operating gurney, surrounded by Brodnax himself and three other respected anatomists (Jordanova 1989, p. 102). In the dream, Brodnax appears to be directing the examination, pointing at an incision in the young woman's body, below her left breast. The dream section of this work pays homage to Hasselhorst's lithograph, *Dissection of a young, beautiful woman* (Figure 20), from sixty years earlier. As discussed previously, this earlier work focussed on the explorations of Professor Lucae and his enquiry into sexual and visual pleasure and the beauty of female anatomy. Brodnax's dream likewise involves a fantasy of male sexual power. As the leader of the

dissection, Brodnax places himself in the position of control over access to the beautiful, vulnerable and available young female body. Like its artistic predecessors the represented female body is eroticised and revealed to the gaze of the male anatomists. Brodnax's employment of the sexualised female autopsy subject confirms that the nineteenth-century European trope resonated with artists far from the social and cultural milieu in which it had formed and that it had at least seeped into the artistic consciousness of twentieth-century North America. Here the fantasy became almost passé but continued to perpetuate the idea of sexual tension that characterised the juxtaposition of mature, clothed male anatomist with the beautiful, young, eroticised female corpse.

The employment of the female autopsy to convey a sense of fantasy and illicit desire is especially evident in staged photographic tableaux by the American early to mid-twentieth century photographer William Mortensen. Mortensen became famous for his mildly erotic photographs of movie stars in the 1920s that were frequently infused with a sense of the macabre. His work also repeatedly represented eroticised female death as in *The Glory of War* from 1927 (Figure 58). Closer to the female autopsy tradition is his occult inspired *The Mark of the Devil* (Figure 59) also created in 1927. This work references the traditional association of transgressive female sexuality with the supernatural, with witches believed to have used sorcery to attract male lovers for illicit sex (Bennett & Rosario 1995, pp. 19 - 47). This connection has also been demonstrated in some particularly prominent artworks: the black cat in Manet's famous painting of the prostitute *Olympia*



Figure 58. William Mortensen, *The Glory of War*, 1927



Figure 59. William Mortensen, *The Mark of the Devil*, 1927

(1863), for example, is frequently read as a symbol of the occult, denoting the woman's libidinous sexuality and independence from the constraints of social norms. In Mortensen's photograph, deviant female sexuality is implied through the portrayal of the woman as a not unwilling participant in an occult ritual. The beautiful young female victim writhes beneath a stiletto blade wielded by a heavily caped and hooded male figure, yet she is not physically restrained and as the knife cuts into her naked belly she gazes at her assailant with an expression half fearful and half full of desire. The strong sexual overtone in this photograph coupled with the penetration of female flesh by the clothed male assailant, is inevitably reminiscent of the pseudo-scientific penetration of the female form in the antecedent female post-mortem artworks, but equally alludes to punishment of deviant female sexuality.

The reference to nineteenth-century female anatomical dissection works is more perfectly realised in Mortensen's *An Anatomy Lesson* (1926)



Figure 60. William Mortensen, *An Anatomy Lesson*, 1926

(Figure 60). The similarity between this work and earlier female autopsy artworks is unmistakable, as Mortensen deliberately replicates their formal and conceptual considerations. The anatomist's sexual interest in the female corpse suggested in the nineteenth-century works and Brodnax's more contemporary paintings, is here openly admitted. Mortensen augments an already sexually loaded trope to fully explore the illicit desire of the anatomist for the beautiful, young female corpse. In this photograph, a young, naked woman lies supine on a table, her alabaster skin is unblemished and her flesh is firm and inviting. Mortensen does not even pretend that the model used for the photograph is actually dead. The viewer participates in the charade, in which the photographer openly references the earlier works that presented dead bodies as living, and lifeless flesh as vital and enticing. The young model here is carefully made up, with full painted lips, and heavily lidded eyes. Her pretty face is turned to the viewer in a pale penumbra of death, but we know that this is just a feint. The open-mouthed and flamboyantly dressed anatomist hunches over his subject, captured in a moment of intense erotic desire as he contemplates the beauty and desirability of his subject. While his left hand rests on the corpse's throat, his right holds a scalpel poised in midair, as he prepares to commence the penetration of the beautiful young corpse at his mercy.

The male anatomist and the female corpse, like so many artworks of this genre are the only subjects in this photograph, yet the title implies that a lesson is being executed. Mortensen knowingly refers in his title to the numerous 'anatomy lesson' paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, the striking difference being of course, that these were

all populated by numerous students and onlookers and the corpse was without exception, male. There are no students or trainee surgeons in Mortensen's photograph to be instructed. The female subject is apparently dead, which leaves only the anatomist and the viewer to participate in the proposed lesson.

The theatricality in Mortensen's work is also reminiscent of German Expressionist films made in the period following the First World War. Lotte Eisner writes that 'Mysticism and magic, the dark forces to which Germans have always been more than willing to commit themselves, had flourished in the face of death on the battlefields' (1969, p. 9). Although the consequences of the war were much more directly felt in Germany than in North America, the aesthetic milieu that characterised post-war German Expressionist film is manifest in Mortensen's photographs which similarly express an interest in the occult and 'dark forces'. While Films such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Cagliari* (1920) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), reflected male fears about newly empowered women following the war, they also referenced fantasies about women as sacrificial victims. The imagery in these films is rooted in social anxieties related to the trauma of war and the changing roles of women in post-war society¹⁵. Mortensen is drawn particularly to the aesthetic manifest in these films rather than the political and social concerns that inspired them. His photographic works share with these films the overblown theatricality, the dramatic use of lighting and the obsession with heightened emotionalism and themes of horror and the supernatural. These aesthetic characteristics provided the ideal context for

¹⁵ This is discussed more fully in the following section of this chapter.

Mortensen to explore the trope of the female anatomy subject in works that pay homage to nineteenth-century female autopsy works but are clearly derivative of film imagery that reflected attitudes to women that perpetuated their victimhood and male fantasies about the eroticised female corpse.

Lustmord: Artistic representations of the dismembered female body in the Weimar Republic

While many nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks are loaded with symbols that suggest lust and violence, there is also a restraint that prevents their descent into absolute sexual brutality. It is this moderation that contributes to the tension and intrigue within the works as the conflicted anatomist appears torn between his desire for the beautiful, young female corpse in his charge and his sense of professional duty and moral opprobrium at the thought of breaking taboos around the dead, and yielding to his desires. These anatomists are not murderers, but they are implicated in the deaths of their autopsy subjects because of the suggestion that their exploration and penetration of the female body moves into realms of prurient interest in the female corpse. In Germany during the Weimar Republic, artworks burgeoned that took female dissection a step further in a way that represented the culmination of the repressed lust and violence intimated in the earlier female autopsy artworks. These *Lustmord* or ‘sex murder’ artworks could be considered to belong to a different artistic genre altogether, except that they too represent the male penetration and dissection of the female body, albeit with the guise of scientific enquiry now completely absent.

A host of German and Austrian artists working in the period

following World War One created works focussing on the sexual murder of women. George Grosz, Otto Dix, Rudolf Schlicter, Oskar Kokoschka, Max Beckmann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Heinrich Davringhausen, and Karl Hofer all produced works of this genre with Dix and Grosz returning to the imagery again and again. The works of Grosz and Dix in particular, uniformly feature a young female corpse who has been viciously sexually assaulted and subjected to a range of depraved dissections, eviscerations and dismemberment. One of the most interesting readings we can gain from the multitude of female sex-murder artworks from post-war Germany is the way in which the dismembered female body once again becomes the vehicle for the discussion of broader social issues and male anxieties around female sexuality and power. The scalpel from nineteenth-century post-mortem artworks has become a knife or dagger, while the anatomist is now a vicious killer. The constant however in all these works is that the holder of the scalpel or knife is clothed and male, while the victim is female, vulnerable, naked or semi-clad and inevitably, ultimately; dead.

It is important to consider the changes in social conditions for women in post-war Germany in particular that contributed to the burgeoning interest in depictions of violent female death. Just as industrialisation had significantly transformed the roles of women in nineteenth-century Europe, the First World War and its aftermath saw dramatic changes for European women that similarly enhanced conflict with men and contributed to an outpouring of negative attitudes towards them. Chief among these changes may well have been a crisis in masculine identity fomented by the ‘asymmetrical effect of the war on men and women’ (Tatar 1995, p. 12).

Many men in post-war Germany resented women who not only came through the First World War relatively unscathed physically, but also with increasing visibility and power through their necessary entrance into the workforce during the years of the war. The antipathy towards women reflected a similar sentiment to that which characterised nineteenth-century male reactions to the changes in female roles under industrialisation. Women were also becoming increasingly politically active and were considered by many men to pose ‘a threat to the social, economic and political balance of power’ in post war Germany (1995, p. 12).

While many artworks produced in the second and third decades of the twentieth century in Europe are associated with the effects of the First World War, the motivations for the concentration of artworks depicting the brutal dismemberment of women at this time are complex, with the artists themselves either evasive or elliptical in their discussion of these works. Dix for example, in response to a friend expressing his disturbance on viewing one of the artist’s *Lustmord* works replied ‘I had to get it out of me – that was all’ (Tatar 1995, p. 15). Maria Tatar suggests that this comment affirms the artist’s own murderous and sexual urges which he sublimated by acting them out on the canvas rather than in real life (1995, p. 15). Grosz, in his autobiography, is remarkably reticent to discuss his many ‘sex murder’ artworks. He makes allusions to ‘the hideous flood of filthy drawings’ (Grosz 1998), as if he is somehow ashamed of their existence, but makes no mention of what motivated him to create them.

Grosz’s experience as a young boy may have had some bearing on the later production of these visceral and brutal tableaux. A devotee of

‘penny dreadfuls’: cheaply produced novellas, and horror shows in which ‘bright red blood was an important ingredient of their subject matter’, Grosz was inspired by graphic depictions of violence, stating that it seemed significant that ‘murder’ was the subject matter of his first oil painting (1998, p. 15). Grosz also had an almost fatalistic sense that his attraction for the brutality in these images destined him ‘to endure horrors’, asking: ‘was a superior force predicting, even though simplistically, the atrocities, the blood and the murder that was to come?’ (1998, p. 14).

Both Dix and Grosz also exhibited disturbing attitudes towards women that suggest that the salacious brutality of their many depictions of dismembered female bodies may also have embodied a punitive response to female sexuality. Grosz famously stated, ‘I can’t stand depth in women, generally it is combined with an ugly predominance of masculine qualities, angularity and poor legs’ (Flavell 1988, p. 43). Eva Karcher also suggests that Dix’s relationships with women were particularly problematic and that his works frequently manifest anxiety caused by the ‘conflict between desire and a resistance motivated by fear’ (1988, p. 41).

While these various personal attitudes towards women inevitably had some bearing on Dix and Grosz’s particular engagement with the dismembered and dissected female corpse, there is also strong evidence that their post-war *Lustmord* works were constructed to be deliberately critical of a society that had lost its way; anaesthetised to the excesses of depravity and cruelty. As such, it could be argued that while Dix and Grosz perpetuated a punitive approach towards the sexually transgressive woman in these artworks, they were at the same time unwittingly expressing their

own attitude that such women were to blame for the ills of society. This is particularly borne out in the many examples of sex-murder artworks in which the two artists depict themselves in the role of assailant.

Grosz's sketch *When It Was All Over, They Played Cards* (1917) (Figure 61), exemplifies his contempt for his society's brutality and indifference. The title refers to the sexual murder of a prostitute by three men. The woman's mutilated body has been unceremoniously dumped in a box upon which one of the card-playing men sits. Drag marks on the floor track the journey of the body from a bed on the right-hand side of the sketch, while a bloodied hatchet and cut-throat razor lie on the floor in the centre and left foreground. The woman's exposed leg, arm and face are covered with wounds and scratches as are the forearms of the grinning man on the left, testifying to the frenzy of the attack. The figures in the sketch are rendered carelessly and comically, yet the subject is macabre in the extreme.



Figure 61. George Grosz, *When It Was All Over, They Played Cards*, 1917

Grosz's motivation for the work is described in his expression of despair upon his return from war:

The catastrophe had begun... I drew drunks, men vomiting, men with clenched fists cursing the moon, sex murderers playing cards sitting on a wooden chest inside which one can see the murdered woman. I drew wine boozers, beer boozers, and a frightened looking man washing his hands sticky with blood... I drew little men fleeing, lonely and demented, through empty streets (Grosz & Dorin 1946, p. 97).

Grosz paints a forlorn picture of German society after the war. The corpse of the abused and discarded prostitute, barely concealed in the wooden box on which her brutish slayer sits, provides an apt metaphor for a society that is titillated by the perverse and horrific and doesn't even bother to hide the corruption it peddles.

Dix and Grosz were both traumatised by their experience as soldiers in the frontline of the war. Grosz spoke of the war as a 'sadistic-masochistic orgy', and stated that for him it was nothing but 'filth, lice, stupor, disease and mutilation' (1998, p. 97). For Dix the effects of the battle endured long after the war with recurrent dreams of the trenches in which he fought (Karcher 1988, p. 46). The Germany they returned to from the battlefield was almost unrecognisable from the one they had left. 'A grey corpse made of stone' was Grosz's impression of post-war Berlin (1998, p. 113). Perhaps more devastating than the physical scars borne by the cities of Germany, was the social poverty that characterised the emerging society of the German Reich established in Weimar in 1919. Suffering from the after-effects of defeat, Germany under the Weimar Republic was characterised by

a culture of mistrust and blame exacerbated by severe economic constraints caused by the debilitating financial cost of war. Grosz describes post-war Germany as ‘a bubbling cauldron’ a time in which ‘everybody was hated’ (1998, p. 149). Syphilis was also again on the rise as a result of the war. Prostitution increased in the major European cities and many returned servicemen contracted the disease. Sexual violence towards women also increased exponentially in the post-war period, a fact that was widely and graphically reported on in the popular press (Stephens 2014).

Sensationalist news coverage abounded of particularly vicious sex-murders that occurred in Berlin early in the twentieth-century. With some ninety-three newspapers vying for readership in Berlin in the post-war years, there was an ever increasing need to appeal to the appetite of a public that was apparently greedy for salacious news and gratuitous articles. As Luci Stephens writes in her essay ‘Murder for Profit: Sensationalism in the Art and Media of Weimar Germany’ (2014): ‘The title ‘Lustmord’ was a regular headline utilised to attract sales, and information about both the attacker and the gruesome act itself were relayed in considerable detail. When thirty women were attacked in one week, *Der Berliner Zeitung* published the headline ‘Das Schrecken von Berlin’¹⁶ (Stephens 2014). Explicit descriptions and depictions of sexual murder were also included in a book by criminologist Erich Wulfen titled *Der Sexualverbrecher*¹⁷ in 1905. This book included particularly graphic images of victims of sexual murder including one that became almost prototypical

¹⁶The Horrors of Berlin

¹⁷the Sex Criminal



Figure 62. From *Sexualverbrecher*, Erich Wulfen, 1905

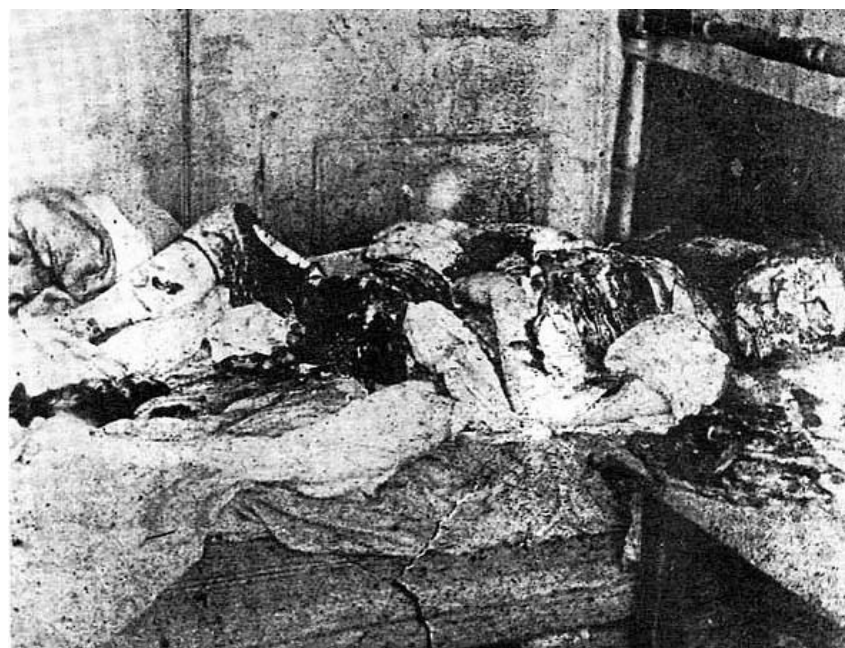


Figure 63. Jack the Ripper Victim, Mary-Jane Kelly, 1888

For many of Dix' works (Figure 62). The widespread distribution of photographs of Jack the Ripper's last victim, Mary Kelly (Figure 63), was likewise replicated in the ferocity of Dix's *Lustmord* artworks (Figures 64 &



Figure 64. Otto Dix, *Lustmord*, 1922



Figure 65. Otto Dix, *Lustmord*, 1922

65). Interestingly reports were also widely circulated about the apparent medical training of Jack the Ripper and the precision with which he dissected the reproductive organs of some of the victims of his crimes (Harrison, Jack & Maybrick 1993, p. 101).

Dix, Grosz and the other artists who were fascinated by the subject of the sexual murder and dismemberment of women, reflected attitudes in post-war European society which seemed to manifest an almost insatiable thirst for graphic depictions of sexual murder. Tatar alludes to the pervasiveness of this attitude when she writes about the aestheticisation of violence in Germany following the First World War, and the turning of ‘the mutilated female body into an object of fascination and dread’ (1995, p. 6). She suggests that ‘in the works of both Dix and Grosz, the initial obsession with female corporeality and sensuality turns, after the war experience, into a fixation with women as carriers of corruption and death’ (1995, p. 125). This reading significantly links the artists’ *Lustmord* works to the nineteenth-century artistic representations of female autopsies in which the corruption associated with female sexuality was shown to be investigated

and unveiled in the dissected female corpses. Once again women were bearing the brunt of male anxiety about their increasing power and influence in political and social spheres, along with the somewhat perennial but newly relevant fear of the effects of syphilis. Thus the public interest in imagery of this type provided a readymade audience for the works produced by Grosz and Dix, although a consideration of the broader context in which these artists worked suggests that their *Lustmord* works were also inspired by a social and political agenda that moves the works beyond the mere replication of a popular aesthetic trope.

To Dix the consequences of diseases cultured and bred in the bordellos and brothels in the city, inevitably led to the linking of women and death (Karcher 1988, p. 193). That men came home from the horrors of war only to contract syphilis from the prostitutes that lined the streets of the major European cities seemed humourlessly ironic to Dix. MoMA curator, Starr Figura writes that ‘Dix used the image of the prostitute as a symbol of the state of decadence, destitution, and depravity that had gripped German society during these years’ (Figura 2011).

While Dix’s representation of violently dismembered and dissected prostitutes could be read as both a criticism of the dehumanising effects of prostitution on the individual and the society in which these abuses occurred, his work *Sex-Murderer: Self Portrait* (1920) (Figure 66), suggests that he is personally complicit in the violence enacted upon the female body. In this work, Dix portrays himself as a knife-wielding sex murderer, decapitating his naked victim, severing limbs, lacerating one breast and excising the other. The fully-clothed Dix grins maniacally as he holds aloft



Figure 66. Otto Dix, *Sex-Murderer: Self Portrait*, 1920

the prostitute's dismembered limb. Body parts fly around the room in a frenzy of violence. The victim's bloodied corset lies at the murderer's feet, while his blood-stained handprints appear all over the woman's body testifying to the madness of the lust-filled attack. There is a strong element of fantasy in this work. Dix places himself in the centre of the picture space and as the focal point of the action. It is a position of extreme power and confidence and contrasts with the fear manifest in Dix's relationships with women. (Karcher 1988, p. 41). Here as the clothed, armed, male assassin, Dix gleefully exerts absolute dominance over the female body.

Just as working-class women in nineteenth-century European society were demonised for the social problems believed to stem from their entry into the workforce and their 'rampant sexuality', the impotence felt by German society following the loss of World War One and the ensuing social

upheaval was directed at the most vulnerable members of society: young, female prostitutes. These ‘working women’ were an easy target. Already socially shunned and blamed for the spread of syphilis and moral corruption, female prostitutes became the fodder for sex-murderers and apparently elicited little compassion from a society more interested in the sensational details of these attacks than the plight of their victims. However, while nineteenth-century artworks of female dissections both reflected and perpetuated society’s attitudes towards women, Dix’s *Lustmord* works can be read as critical of a society that demonstrated both a brutal disregard for women and an obscene blood-lust for evermore gratuitous and salacious imagery. At the same time Dix’s positioning of himself in the role of sex-murderer suggests that these works can be considered as reflective of the



Figure 67. Otto Dix, *Lustmord*, 1922



Figure 68. Otto Dix, *Lustmord*, 1922

artist's own desire to punish the sexually transgressive woman, both for the personal anxiety he felt about the female body and the perceived responsibility of the female prostitute in the more general spread of disease and misery to his male compatriots.

Stylistically, there are also similarities between nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks and the early twentieth-century *Lustmord* works. In both genres, the dissected female corpse is either depicted alone (Figure 67), or in the company of the clothed, male anatomist/assailant (Figure 68). Like Dix's *Sex-Murderer: Self Portrait*, George Grosz's garish *John the Sex Murderer* (1918) (Figure 69), similarly depicts a clothed male assailant at the scene of a hideous crime. His naked female victim is left with sightless eyes and rictus grin. Her arms have been severed while her nearly



Figure 69. George Grosz, *John the Sex Murderer*, 1918

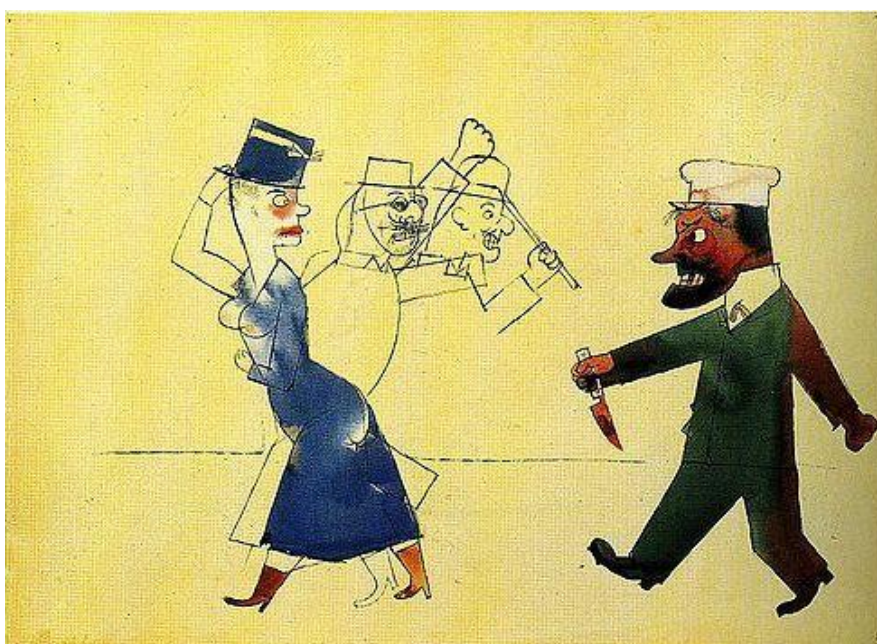


Figure 70. George Grosz, *John the Ladykiller*, 1916

decapitated head lies on a blood-soaked pillow. In another watercolour painting, *John the Ladykiller* (1916) (Figure 70), Grosz portrays a frightened woman running from a knife-wielding assassin. His clenched fists, gritted teeth and fiendish grin belie his evil intent, and his bloody knife suggests that he has already claimed a victim and is in pursuit of his next. Two other hastily sketched figures approach the criminal brandishing fists and sticks to protect the woman.

As with some of Dix's *Lustmord* works, these can be read as self-portraits as a staged photograph that Grosz had taken of himself acting in the role of Jack the Ripper (1918) (Figure 71), suggests that like Dix, Grosz also saw himself as connected to the violence and depravity of the post-war



Figure 71. George Grosz as Jack the Ripper in *Self-Portrait with Eva Peter in the Artist's Studio*, 1918

German society that he loathed. In his autobiography, Grosz describes Weimar society as 'dismembered' (1998, p. 190). The use of this term is intriguing as it inevitably calls to mind both the limbless soldiers that populate so many of his artworks and the dissected and disfigured female corpses in his 'sex murder' works. As such, the maimed and broken bodies of returned servicemen and the viciously assaulted female bodies that Grosz illustrates act as allegorical depictions of the traumatised and dysfunctional society in which he lived.

In the photograph of Grosz as Jack the Ripper, it is interesting to ponder the significance of the doll at the feet of Eva Peters who poses as the unsuspecting victim. The positioning of the doll in the work implicates it in the narrative that is being played out as there appears no other logical reason for its inclusion in the image. Dolls are frequently employed by artists to stand in the place of human figures; in particular as substitute or representative female figures. This is because they represent what German psychologist Ernst Jentsch describes as 'unheimlich' (the uncanny). Jentsch used this term to describe the dissonance we feel when confronted with an object that provokes uncertainty: that looks like something that it's not or when something inanimate resembles a living being (1906, p. 10). Thus the doll in its likeness for the human figure becomes an uncanny and frequently disturbing simulacrum of a living human being.

There is a sense in which the corpses in female anatomy artworks themselves can be viewed as types of dolls. As inanimate and unresponsive forms they become the playthings of the anatomists: toys to be manipulated, defiled, dissected and dismembered. They are figures of fantasy to amuse



Figure 72. Otto Dix, *Still life in the Studio*, 1924

and excite; exploited at the whim of the anatomist. The same reading can be applied to the pregnant but truncated and dismembered corpses in van Rymdsdyk's anatomical drawings and Susini's demountable wax anatomical models that like many dolls can be taken apart and reassembled. We can read the doll in Grosz's photograph as a representative of the woman about to be attacked, much as the women in Dix's *Lustmord* paintings become the puppets of their assailants. This substitution becomes more apparent in a final work by Dix, *Still Life in the Studio* (1924) (Figure 72). In this painting Dix juxtaposes a headless dress-maker's dummy with a heavily pregnant, semi-naked woman, both partially framed by an artist's easel. The dummy loosely mimics the pose of the model and Dix demonstrates the

effectiveness of the doll, in its likeness for the human figure, as a fantasy object for artists to substitute, explore and investigate the real.

Dismembered dolls: Hans Bellmer's 'Poupée'

In her book *The Figure of the Doll in Culture and Theory*, Asko Kauppinen suggests that 'dolls are inextricably linked with sexuality' (2000, p. 7). Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century several artists have employed dolls as representative of female figures in ways that reflect the sexualised and dissected anatomical models and artworks from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While these dolls do not necessarily directly reference artistic representations of female autopsies, they are connected with them in a variety of ways. Formally, many of these dolls are particularly reminiscent of van Rymsdyk's medical depictions of truncated and dismembered female bodies, while conceptually the similarities of the eroticised and dismembered female dolls are inevitably connected with the similarly sexualised and dissected female corpses depicted in nineteenth-century European female post-mortem artworks. German Surrealist sculptor and photographer Hans Bellmer's eroticised, pubescent dolls provoke similar feelings of transgressive sexual tension to that produced in the female anatomical works discussed previously.

Bellmer's production of his numerous *Poupées* in the 1930s was apparently originally inspired by his attendance at the opera *The Tales of Hoffman*, by Jacques Offenbach in the early 1930s (Jelinek & Miller 2010, p. 35). In this opera, the hero Hoffman falls in love with a life-sized doll, 'Olympia', thinking that she is in fact human. Olympia is subsequently torn



Figure 73. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1933

apart by another character and Hoffman's error is heartbreakingly revealed. It was after watching this opera, that Bellmer created his first doll. Perhaps his most famous work *La Poupée* (Figure 73) was made in 1933 and presented in his book of photographs also titled *La Poupée* in 1936. Standing at just over four and a half feet tall, the doll is constructed from a papier-mâché of plaster and flax fibre, which Bellmer sculpted into a female torso and mask-like head. Embellishments include a glass eye and a long unkempt wig of dark hair. Her legs are prosthetic, while her arms are non-existent. In the black and white photograph, the doll leans against a wall at

the base of a staircase in a darkened space. She is clothed in a cheap and ill-fitting chemise that exposes her naked buttocks which are presented to the viewer. Her head twists and she gazes over her shoulder through the sightless, death-like eye. So much has been written about this work, and yet she remains unfathomable and disturbing. She is a mixture of coquette and innocent child: overtly sexual and disarmingly vulnerable. The power in the work lies in the 'uncanny' quality discussed earlier. She is obviously and patently inanimate: a doll composed of course textured, unrealistic elements, yet she is also disquietingly human. There is a sense that terrific violence has been perpetrated against her: her 'skin' is slashed and scarred and her arm sockets suggest almost that her limbs have been wrenched from her body. The frenzied violence of Dix's *Lustmord* artworks is also imbued in this work. She is a tragic figure and we regard her with a mixture of horror and sympathy. She is literally disarmed and cannot repel attacks on her body and although as an inanimate collection of disparate materials she is quite dead; she is also disconcertingly alive.

Hal Foster describes Bellmer's dolls as 'uncanny confusions of animate and inanimate figures, ambivalent conjunctions of castrative and fetishistic forms, compulsive repetitions of erotic and traumatic scenes, difficult intricacies of sadism and masochism, of desire, defusion, and death' (1993, p. 101). This description could equally be applied to the beautiful young naked and semi-naked female corpses lying on dissecting tables before mature, clothed anatomists in nineteenth-century autopsy artworks. The conjunction of the erotic and traumatic are inevitably manifest in these earlier artworks as are the suggestions of fetishism, sadism



Figure 74. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1934

and death. Interestingly Bellmer's further motivation for his creation of his first doll was also tied to his own transgressive desire and unrequited lust. Silke Krohn writes that Bellmer sought to sublimate his desire for his adolescent cousin Ursula by secretly making the doll as an antitype to the 'ideal woman' (Jelinek & Miller 2010, p. 35). That Bellmer's transference of desire was successful is borne out in his obsession with the fabrication of more and more dolls in increasingly dismembered and sexualised forms.

Krohn also suggests that Bellmer's photograph of his disassembled doll from 1934 (Figure 74) 'recalls images of an anatomical dissection' (2010, p. 35). This is because the mysterious conjunction of transgressive

sexual desire, sadistic violence and death are inevitably manifest in both genres. As Foster writes, Bellmer's photographs frequently present his '*Poupées* in scenes evocative of sex as well as death' (Foster 1993, p. 102). Bellmer's dolls increasingly manifest his sexual fantasy in which he plays with the forms: dissecting and reassembling; twisting and contorting them into more highly eroticised and dehumanised compositions.

Mulvey's theories around fragmentation and fetishisation are also particularly relevant to this work in which Bellmer has literally deconstructed the female body to *reconstruct* a fantasy of female sexuality that responds to his own desires. In fragments, she is expressed as a collection of fetish objects rather than as an individual. Once again Bellmer's version of the female body is an invention founded on a masculine projection of female sexuality in which her body is reduced to consumable pieces; victimised, mutilated, and objectified. Mulvey describes traditional displays of women for men as 'an amazing masquerade, which expresses a strange male undertone of fear and desire' (1989, pp. 7,8). Bellmer's works amply manifest this sentiment as he constructs bizarre performers in his lurid pantomimes; objects of transgressive desire which he then punishes for the fear they engender within him.

In *Untitled* (Figure 75), Bellmer's doll becomes a headless conjunction of limbs and female genitalia: two sets of splayed female legs incongruously connected by female buttocks. The child's socks and shoes again point to the pre-pubescent or adolescent female and the staging of the work on bare wooden boards make the body look ill-used and discarded. This sense of sexual abuse and abandonment is augmented yet further in



Figure 75. Hans Bellmer, *Untitled*, 1934



Figure 76. Hans Bellmer, *Untitled*, 1934



Figure 77. Hans Bellmer, *Untitled*, 1934

another two works by Bellmer, also *untitled* (Figures 76 & 77). In one an ineffable conflation of female limbs and exposed genitals lie bruised and twisted on a mattress, while in the other, the body has been violently abused and its dismembered remains carelessly thrown down a staircase by the perpetrator of the attack. These dismembered dolls become dismembered female corpses, and Foster suggests that ‘they also exacerbate sexist fantasies about the feminine’ (1993, p. 122).

Tellingly, Bellmer describes his *Poupées* as ‘victims’ and writes of his desire to have mastery over them’ (Foster 1993, p. 107). He locates his own illicit ‘thoughts of the little girls’ in the bodies of the dolls and seeks to punish them for the power that they exert over him. The punishment of woman for her sexual power manifest in nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks and the Weimar artists’ *Lustmord* works, is once again here

implicated in Bellmer's *Poupées*. The dismemberment and dissection of the doll by Bellmer equates to an attack on the image of the female body, in which it is shattered by the artist in order to punish it and avoid considering it in its entirety. Foster argues that 'the physical shattering of the female image' is required for the 'psychic shattering of the male subject'. He applies this dictum to surrealist imagery generally, but in particular to Bellmer's dolls in which he suggests that 'the ecstasy of the one may come at the cost of the dispersal of the other' (1993, p. 102). Thus in Bellmer's fantasy, his own sexual legitimacy is informed by the sexual and physical destruction of the objects of his desire. The dolls act as a facsimile of the young female bodies to which he is attracted but denied. His frustration is expressed in his imagery of the abuse and dismemberment of these bodies, which constitute a form of revenge on the possessors of 'adolescent charms' that he has such difficulty in resisting (Jelinek & Miller 2010, p. 35). This is little different to the revenge on female sexuality more generally which tacitly informs nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks and is more graphically manifest in Dix and Grosz's 'sex-murder' works from earlier in the twentieth century.

Although his brutalised and sexualised *Poupées*, can be seen to have arisen from Bellmer's own particular fantasies, similarly disconcerting images of fragmented and dismembered female bodies were produced by other artists aligned with the Surrealist movement. Alberto Giacometti's highly abstracted bronze sculpture *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (1932) (Figure 78), is a particularly disturbing example. This work represents a



Figure 78. Alberto Giacometti, *Woman with Her Throat Cut*, 1932

woman's body, raped and 'disemboweled, arched in a paroxysm of sex and death' (Flint 2015). The woman's legs are splayed, her ribcage laid open and her exposed cervical spine terminates in a small bulb of a head with mouth agape. The abstraction of the figure heightens the savagery of the sexual violence that she has been subjected to; she is dehumanised and negated in Giacometti's representation. The fragmentation serves to reduce her to a set of female body parts which once again effectively abrogates the necessity to consider her as a 'unified entity' (Nochlin 1994, p. 53). As such, the corpse is de-subjectified, and becomes an anonymous receptacle for the fantasy of male lust and fury. The pendulum shaped extrusion attached to the figure's left arm is frequently read as phallic, although Giacometti stated that it 'was inspired by the nightmare of not being able to lift an arm to push an attacker away' (Tate 2001). The overall formal effect of the splayed corpse is also representative of an open mantrap, alluding to female sexuality lying in wait to trap and emasculate the male. The work

then becomes the familiar male fantasy in which dangerous female sexuality is punished through the penetration and ultimate dissection of the female body.

Another figure of Surrealist fantasy is portrayed in Picasso's *Seated Bather* (1930) (Figure 79). Here the abstracted female body is equipped with a head that takes the form of what Robert Hughes describes as 'a small, fierce animal' with the vertical mouth implicated as the emasculating *vagina dentata* (1991, p. 252). Once again treacherous female sexuality, symbolised in the toothed vagina, is punished by the male artist in the deconstruction of the female body. Hughes suggests that 'it would be hard to exaggerate the



Figure 79. Pablo Picasso, *Seated Bather*, 1930

importance' of the 'mythology of sexual violence' to Surrealism (1991, p. 252). The persistent representation of dissection and dismemberment in Surrealist imagery demonstrates that this sexual violence frequently culminated in the fragmentation of the female form and as such these works perpetuate the artistic convention of punishing female sexuality by applying the literal or figurative knife to the female body.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of the fragmented female body in Surrealist art is manifested in René Magritte's *L'évidence éternelle* (1930) (Figure 80), a work consisting of five separate framed canvasses, each depicting part of a naked female body. When hung, this work approximates a life-size representation of a woman and the framing of her various body fragments separates each for individual attention, beginning with her averted face which fills the top section of the work. The turning aside of her face permits our perusal, although she is so disconnected from the remainder of her body that once again there is no requirement that we consider her in her entirety. Indeed Magritte deliberately suggests that we should be more interested in the individual component parts than her body as a whole. Like a series of highly cropped film stills, we focus on her breasts, her belly and genital region, her lower thighs and knees and finally, her ankles and feet. While we can 'fill in' the missing pieces in our mind's eye, the fragmentation of her body serves to depersonalise the figure Magritte has depicted. She is also metaphorically dismembered; the sections of her body isolated from the whole.



Figure 80. René Magritte, *L'évidence éternelle*, 1930

Conclusion

Artworks involving the dissection and dismemberment of the eroticised female body by the male anatomist, murderer or artist essentially relates to a revenge exacted by men for their perceived emasculation by the power that women exert over them. Bellmer's transgressive desire for young girls drives him to sexually reify then abuse, dismember and dissect his substitutionary dolls in an attempt to exorcise the power he believes they hold over him. The degradations of syphilis in nineteenth-century Europe and the changing roles of women under industrialisation was mirrored in post-war Germany and saw a burgeoning of artworks in both these time periods that focussed on highlighting deviant female sexuality and then responding to the threat embodied in the female form by dissecting, dismembering and disempowering the female body. In all the cases discussed thus far, the male artists could be considered complicit in encouraging and perpetuating a myopic and misogynistic vision of female sexuality, with Bellmer's hideously abused and denigrated dolls perhaps the most disturbing of them all. As noted, these constructions of the female body are all the inventions of male artists founded on masculine fantasies, and as signifiers of female sexuality are necessarily detached from reality. As Mulvey argues, the referent for conventional representations of the female form is frequently the male unconscious rather than the bodies of 'actual women' (1989, p. xiii).

The final chapter of this enquiry will discuss female artists working later in the twentieth and into the early twentieth-first century whose creative

responses to a trope traditionally handled by male artists, present an intriguing and confronting re-evaluation of male fantasies of female sexuality as represented in the dismembered female body.

Chapter Five

My Body, My Knife: A critical analysis of the fragmented female body in art

My knives are like a tongue – I love you, I hate you. If you don't love me, I am ready to attack

Louise Bourgeois

Until the middle of the twentieth century, male artists were overwhelmingly responsible for representations of dissected and dismembered female bodies. Science and medicine were long considered the exclusive domain of men, and as it was in these professional arenas that depictions of scientific explorations first emerged, women were largely excluded from contributing to representations of anatomical bodies. The popularity of the dissected female corpse among male artists and authors in nineteenth-century Europe saw the establishment of the trope as a manifestation of a distinctly masculine fantasy involving both punishment of female sexuality and transgressive desire. Male artists in the first half of the twentieth century took a proprietary interest in the dissected and dismembered female body, perpetuating its representation as an object of familiarity to the knowing male gaze. From the middle of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, female artists critically examined traditional artistic engagements with the female body, with three in particular attempting to wrest the motif of the dissected female body from male hands, by subverting the artistic conventions that perpetuated the trope as a projection of male fantasy. This chapter will consider the creative responses of artists Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman, to a trope traditionally handled exclusively

by male artists. It will demonstrate the effectiveness of a variety of artistic interventions employed by these artists to challenge, destabilise and reinterpret traditional masculine constructions of the dissected female body.

In the 1970s representations of the female body in relation to the male gaze became one of the central issues of feminist discourse (Dekel 2013, p. 14). In her book *Gendered: Art and Feminist Theory*, Tal Dekel writes that feminist artists:

attempted to create a counter-response to the traditional representation of the female body in Western art—a negative stereotypical gender bias which had tendentiously and voyeuristically exploited the female body under the male gaze (2013, p. 14).

As part of this response, artistic representations of the female body were treated with extreme caution, with many feminist artists restricting themselves to depicting their own body at this time (Dekel 2013, p. 15). Bourgeois, Smith and Sherman led an avant-garde of female artists from the mid-twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, who returned to expressions of the female body to deliberately challenge its historical masculine construction and attempt to redefine it in response to its conventional patriarchal associations.

Louise Bourgeois – Femme Couteau

Once when we were sitting together at the dining table, I took white bread, mixed it with spit, and moulded a figure of my father. When this figure was done, I started cutting off the limbs with a knife. I see this as my first sculptural solution. It was right for the moment, and it helped me.

Louise Bourgeois (Jelinek & Miller 2010, p. 37)

There is something particularly poignant in Bourgeois' reminiscence about the dismemberment of the bread effigy she made of her father as a child. The severing of her father's bread limbs can be seen as a precursor to the headless and limbless drawings and sculptures she created throughout her artistic career. Cutting is central to Bourgeois' work and the knife is a recurring symbol, although its meaning is not always immediately apparent. In some works, giant knives are suspended over headless female figures while in others the female body itself takes on the form of a knife in an ironic play on the oft-used representation of woman as the victim of the blade. Bourgeois' body of work is also strewn with dismembered body parts. They are the most significantly recurring objects throughout the entire course of her creative career. Dismemberment and dissection are the tools of trade that Bourgeois calls upon to create an autobiographical narrative that stems from her unreconciled fury at her father and his young lover which traumatised her childhood and according to Bourgeois herself, was the primary inspiration for her artistic practice (Bernadac & Dusing 2006, p. 54).

Her father had taken her eighteen year old nanny as a lover (a situation accepted by her ailing mother), and Bourgeois felt betrayed and abandoned, a sentiment that she returned to again and again in her work (Küster & Fondation Beyeler. 2011, p. 26). Bourgeois was also belittled and ridiculed by her father, and grew up 'in the knowledge that for her father she was inferior as a girl' (Jelinek & Miller 2010, p. 37). Bourgeois found a 'sculptural solution' to her feelings of repression by frequently making works that reacted to the troubled relationship. The 'solution' that

Bourgeois turned to is significant in that it manifested in a strategy used by male artists throughout history; to cut, dissect and dismember. Now however, the strategy employed by Bourgeois represents a feminine response, and a significant evolution in Western art history is realised because at last the knife that symbolically dissects and dismembers is held in the hands of a female artist.

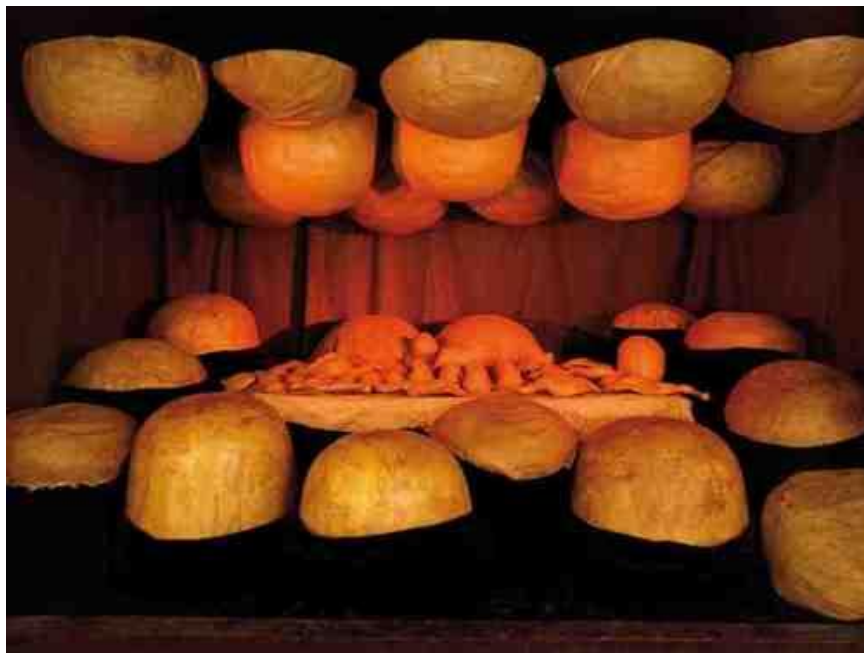


Figure 81. Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 1974

In 1974 Bourgeois took her dissection of the figure of her father to a whole new level in her installation *Destruction of the Father* (Figure 81). In this work, which recalls her earlier dissection of her father's effigy, Bourgeois has symbolically dismembered her father and displayed the pieces of his body in a tableau, which is illuminated by a red light, giving the analogous collection of flesh-coloured forms an organic appearance. There is nothing particularly identifiable amongst the predominantly dome shaped structures, but their similarity to loaves of bread is informed by

Bourgeois' own description of the work. She wrote: 'The children grabbed him [the father] and put him on the table. And he became the food. They took him apart, dismembered him. Ate him up. And so he was liquidated... the same way he liquidated his children' (Kellein, Bourgeois & Kunsthalle Bielefeld. 2006, p. 123). The dismemberment of the male figure can be read as a literal response to the issues that Bourgeois had with her relationship with her own father, but also demonstrates her employment of cutting as a means of reconciling issues that concern her.

Bourgeois' use of dismemberment to symbolically punish the male figure represents a significant contrast to the long history of artistic dismemberment of the female figure at the hands of male artists. There is an added complexity to Bourgeois' work though, in that she also frequently dismembers female figures as well. Unlike the masculine artistic tradition however, Bourgeois' dismembered female figures are not the object of salacious voyeurism. Instead, the works frequently act as self-portraits in which she represents the sense of impotence she experienced as a child in the face of negative attitudes and experiences that she felt were beyond her control. As a result, many of her sculptures are expressive of her desire for revenge while also capturing her feelings of helplessness. Thus, as allegories of herself, they portray the female in a more empathetic light. The complexity in her work is manifest in the fact that while her dismembered female forms are vulnerable, they are frequently also imbued with a degree of power and control in response to their situation as victims. Bourgeois' declaration about her practice is very telling when she states 'in my art I am the murderer... the equation is really sex and murder, sex and death... the

fear of sex and death is the same' (Bernadac & Dusinger 2006, p. 57). As such, Bourgeois sculpts herself as both victim and aggressor, illustrated in an early work in which she transforms herself into a figure that aptly describes both her view of herself and her modus operandi: *Femme Couteau* (Knife Woman).

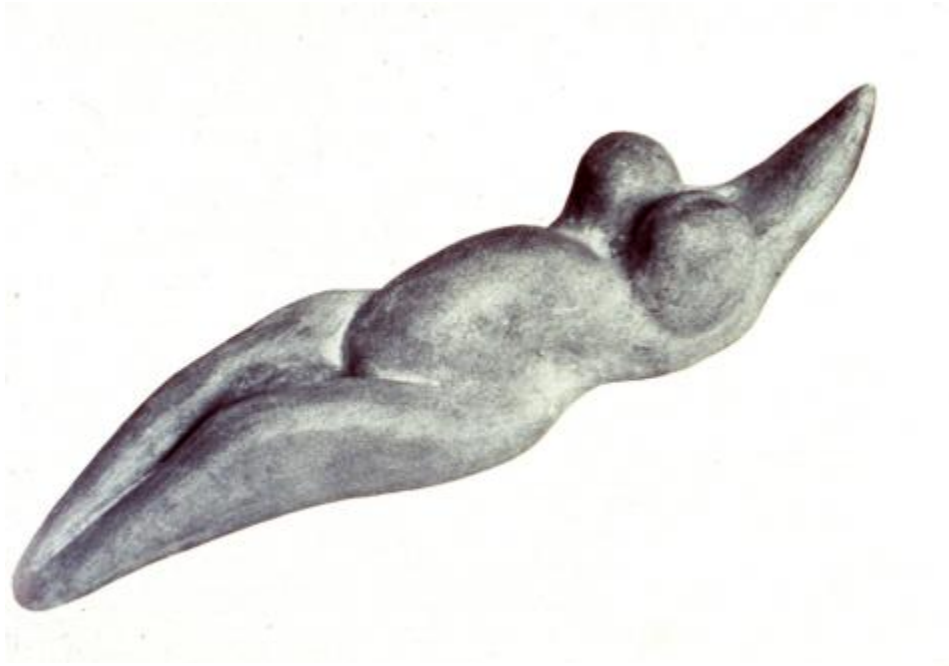


Figure 82. Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Couteau*, 1969

Created in 1969, *Femme Couteau* (Figure 82) is a small, (40cm long), smooth, marble sculpture. Its form expresses a naked female figure, with rounded breasts and belly. The legs are defined but united and end in a sharp point, while the head is rendered as a smoothly elongated triangle. As with so many of Bourgeois' sculptures, the arms are missing so that the overall feel of the work is streamlined and vaguely blade-like. Bourgeois writes of the work: 'This marble sculpture – my *Femme Couteau* – embodies the polarity of woman, the destructive and seductive... In the *Femme Couteau*, the woman turns herself into a blade, she is defensive' (Kèuster & Fondation Beyeler. 2011, p. 81). In an interview with Dorothy

Seiberling in 1974, Bourgeois intimated that the work is also phallic, stating that as woman ‘feels vulnerable because she can be wounded by the penis [she] tries to take on the weapon of the aggressor’ (Nixon 2005, p. 233). As a result, the female body represented in this work is empowered by taking on the characteristics of the male, and in contrast to the defenceless bodies of the young women at the mercy of the scalpel-wielding anatomist or knife-wielding murderer, she becomes the aggressor rather than the victim.

Much of Bourgeois’ early sculptural works involve the conjunction of dismembered body parts and the conflation in particular of male and female sexual organs. A particularly well known example from this period is her bronze hanging sculpture, *Janus Fleuri* (1968) (Figure 83). This work is generally read as a combination of the heads of two phalluses, with the ‘coarsely modelled junction’ evocative of a vaginal slit (Bernadac & Dusinberre 2006, p. 108). The conjoined and disembodied organs speak of an ambivalent sexuality that reflects a consistent theme of anxiety about



Figure 83. Louise Bourgeois, *Janus Fleuri*, 1968

sexual relationships as a result of her father's betrayal of the family. Bourgeois spoke of wanting to 'chop the heads off' copulating couples when she thought of what he had done (Darrieussecq 1998, p. 56). The dismembered phallus heads inevitably speak of castration, again referencing the punishment of Bourgeois' father.



Figure 84. Louise Bourgeois, *Nature Study*, 1984



Figure 85. Gustave Moreau, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1864

This sentiment is expressed even more clearly in another bronze sculpture, *Nature Study* (1984) (Figure 84), which Bourgeois claims is a portrait of her father (Bernadac & Dusinberre 2006, p. 122). This work is a grotesque hybrid creature of indefinite gender; part animal and part human. Squatting on lion-like haunches, the figure rises in gleaming polished gold

to a height of nearly a metre. Headless and armless, with multiple human breasts and a phallic tail that curls suggestively between its legs, *Nature Study* can be read as addressing the three central issues that motivated Bourgeois' creations. The removal of the head is the emasculation and decapitation of the father; the lack of arms speak of Bourgeois' own sense of frustration and incapacity to defend herself against her father's cruelty, and the multi-breasted, crouching figure refers to the monstrous sexuality, waiting to strike; the embodiment of the childhood nanny that she blamed for her father's indiscretions. Bourgeois describes the work once again as an act of revenge against her father, stating 'Since I was demolished by my father, why shouldn't I demolish him? I take a really masculine animal and I give him breasts in ridicule. And after having given him breasts, why not give him a second pair of breasts? And then I cut off his head' (Bernadac & Dusinberre 2006, p. 122).

The creature in *Nature Study* immediately conjures the hybrid beast in Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864) (Figure 85). Here the sphinx is shown to sexually dominate Oedipus on whom she has pounced. Her breasts are exposed and thrust forward. She gazes directly into Oedipus's eyes while her lion-like paws are placed over his genital area. As Bourgeois describes, sexual revenge and dominance of the male is the primary theme of her sculpture, and the dismemberment of the male by cutting off his head, gives the artist here the ultimate victory and represents a subversion of traditional artistic roles in which the male artist has dismembered and decapitated female bodies in acts of revenge and sexual dominance.

Bourgeois' works are relentlessly autobiographical; the cycle of the

need to express anger, revenge, frustration and vulnerability is interminable and it is difficult to move beyond the personal aspect of these motivations when analysing the broader meanings in her creations. Nevertheless the use of bodily dismemberment to represent punishment and vulnerability from the perspective of a female artist represents a significant instalment in the history of artistic representations of the dissected and dismembered body.

Like Bellmer, Bourgeois also employed fragmented and dismembered dolls to discuss issues around sexuality and power. Both Bourgeois and Bellmer were motivated by somewhat monomaniacal preoccupations in their work; Bellmer by his repeated attempt to sublimate his illicit desire for his young cousin, and Bourgeois by her seemingly endless desire to punish her father. As with her bronze sculptures of truncated and dismembered body parts, Bourgeois' soft-sculpture dolls also carry a diverse range of readings around vulnerability and revenge. In 1991, Bourgeois wrote: 'The subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering' (Kèuster & Fondation Beyeler. 2011, p. 115). Bourgeois' dolls are no longer hybrid creatures, or confections of excised body parts. Many are complete, life-size human dolls that like Bellmer's *Poupées*, exhibit a sense of the uncanny, in their ability to evoke a strong emotional response despite the fact that they are obviously lifeless and crude imitations of real human bodies. The majority of the female dolls are dismembered. Some of them are missing parts of legs, some are headless; nearly all are without arms. Some are also particularly troubling in their apparent perpetuation of the association between the female form and death.



Figure 86. Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, 1996

In one such work, *Untitled* (1996) (Figure 86), a life-size female body hangs corpse-like by a wire attached to her abdomen. The patchwork body is composed of irregular shaped pieces of flesh-coloured material, stitched together and almost over-stuffed. The seams are raised and obvious; uneven scars, evidence of trauma. The legs and head hang below the level of the abdomen and the body is patently female with massive breasts thrust skyward. The head in particular, is a mass of patchwork pieces with open, sightless eyes and mouth agape in a silent scream, or perhaps a rictus grin. The unseeing eyes are deliberate inclusions, and once again refer to Bourgeois' sexual anxieties associated with her father's indiscretions. Describing the reason that so many of her figures are sightless, Bourgeois explains,

I had to be blind to the mistress that lived with us. I had to be blind to the pain of my mother. I had to be blind to the fact that I was a

little bit sadistic with my brother. I had to be blind to the fact that my sister slept with the man across the street. I had an absolute revulsion of everybody – everything and everybody. Mostly for erotic reasons, sexual reasons (Bernadac & Dusinberre 2006, p. 89).

The recurring theme of the armless woman is a favourite of Bourgeois and represents a play on words that she enjoyed (Meyer-Thoss & Bourgeois 1992, p. 177): they are armless, so they are disarmed; powerless to defend themselves, helpless and vulnerable. The suspension of the figure in mid-air implies that this has been done *to* her and that she is the victim of violence. While the work is reminiscent of Bellmer's eroticised and dismembered dolls, it does not speak of the gratuitous eroticisation of the female corpse. Rather Bourgeois' work provides a more empathetic portrayal of the female body. Although Bellmer's dolls connote the abused and discarded female body, they also remain sexually provocative, whereas the vulnerability of Bourgeois' armless figures invite a feeling of sympathy instead of erotic appraisal. Bourgeois describes the soft-sculpture dolls as illustrative of her own sense of vulnerability and impotence. The emotional violence of her father's continual jibes and dismissal of her abilities and intellect on the basis of her gender is reflected in the mournful figure, suspended, lifeless and without recourse. She thus represents victimhood from the position of the female victim; crying out against the injustices she has endured but also against the violence perpetrated against women more generally: a savage history that has continually sexualised, disarmed and abused them both in reality and in artistic representation.



Figure 87. Louise Bourgeois, *Sainte Sébastienne*, 2002



Figure 88. Andrea Martegna, *Saint Sebastian*, 1480

Another armless soft-sculpture doll is a provocative reinterpretation of a much represented figure synonymous with martyrdom. *Sainte Sébastienne* (2002) (Figure 87) is a female version of the third century martyr, Saint Sebastian, who according to Christian tradition was killed during the Diocletian persecution of Christians in Rome. Saint Sebastian is a favourite figure of Christian art and is portrayed with his arms tied behind his back and pierced through with many arrows (Figure 88). In Bourgeois' version Sebastian has become Sébastienne, with large breasts and missing arms. Arrows pierce her neck, shoulder, belly, calf and vagina. Despite these assaults, she strides forward, face contorted in pain. Although similar in appearance to a multitude of her soft sculptures, Bourgeois universalises the message in this work by associating the figure with an instantly recognisable martyr of Western history. Saint Sebastian's stoicism in the face of the

onslaught of violent attacks becomes in Bourgeois' version, a representative of female suffering; the arrow in her vagina alluding to the history of sexual assault upon women as well. Once again the excised arms speak of woman's vulnerability, but her determined stride suggests that she refuses to remain in the role of the passive victim of masculine fantasy and abuse. In many ways it is perhaps this work that is most accurately autobiographical of Bourgeois. Although she perceived herself as vulnerable and powerless; a victim of an oppressive and contemptuous father, Louise Bourgeois was one of the leading avant-garde female artists who rebelled against masculine constructions of the female body and successfully carved out an artistic career by employing many of the same strategies that had been used historically to objectify women and deny their agency.



Figure 89. Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Couteau*, 2002

Bourgeois' later iterations of her 'knife woman' sculptures convey a particularly interesting interpretation of female vulnerability. While the duality between vulnerability and aggression present in the earlier works is still in evidence here, now she is much more literally armed, although

paradoxically it appears that her weapon of choice is directed at herself. In *Femme Couteau* (2002) (Figure 89) the sexually vulnerable 'armless' woman appears once again, but now she has been given a powerful weapon of both defence and aggression. In this work, the fabric female doll lies supine. She is de-individualised by the absence of a head and thus becomes a representative female figure. Once again the body has been dismembered with the lower section of her left leg missing, along with her arms and head. Extending from a place below her throat between her breasts, a huge hinged knife looms threateningly over her body, the blade extending centrally above her abdomen to the top of her thighs. The knife is phallic; erect and poised for penetration of the soft female form, yet it also acts as a trap; if depressed the blade will disembowel the female figure but at the same time it renders her body unassailable. Intriguingly the phallic knife can also be read as a male presence in the work and as such the sculpture is reminiscent of nineteenth-century female autopsy artworks in which the exposed and vulnerable female body lies beneath the blade wielded by the male hand. In



Figure 90. Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Couteau*, 2002

Bourgeois' work however, we also read the knife as defensive. Any potential attacker will be repelled by the threat of the knife literally poised above them. Thus while the female form is still vulnerable to physical assault: her sexuality is now also a weapon of repulsion.

In other variations of this work Bourgeois has given her female figure a veritable arsenal of weapons (Figure 90), with saw-tooth knives ready to strike fear into any would-be assailant. In all these works there yet remains a danger to self from the weapons of defence. The figure becomes a metaphorical female spider (another of Bourgeois' recurring symbols): fatal to its mate and also ultimately suicidal in its self-defence. This appears to be the plight of Louise Bourgeois' 'knife women': desirable, sexually enticing and vulnerable, complex and contradictory. As representations of female sexuality they are far less legible than many of those created by male artists. Indeed there is very little eroticisation in the representation of these women and they are more likely to arouse an empathetic response from the viewer than one of sexual excitement. Nevertheless the female form that Bourgeois portrays is powerful to repel physical assaults and deaf to emotional taunts, even if in her defence she may place her own being in peril.

It is difficult to overstate Louise Bourgeois' contribution to the rise of female artists questioning conventional masculine constructions of the female body. There is an irony in Bourgeois' 'knife woman' artworks that particularly stems from the fact that they are created by a female artist. In the earlier artworks of female dissections, sexual murders and Bellmer's dolls, female sexuality has routinely been represented as inherently dangerous. To combat this threat, male artists employed blades in various

forms to investigate its source, disempower, dissect and dismember. Bourgeois references this female vulnerability to male assault in the pliant and abused fabric dolls she has created. Yet she has also taken the knife in her own hand to dismember, dissect and emasculate the male body. In her works Bourgeois has re-empowered the female body, either by reinterpreting it in the form of the knives traditionally used against it, or by fitting the female form with blades that symbolize the power of female sexuality and the resourcefulness of woman in the face of masculine contempt.

Kiki Smith: Reclaiming the dismembered female body

Like Bourgeois, Kiki Smith responded to the violence enacted on women's bodies both literally and figuratively throughout history, by depicting dismembered female forms in her art practice from the early 1980s. While these artworks can be read as social commentary on domestic violence towards women, they also act as statements against traditional patriarchal artistic engagements with the female body. In her book *Kiki Smith* (2005), Helaine Posner writes: 'Smith has become one of the leading women artists of her time by effectively revalidating the body as subject matter, for herself and her generation of artists... she has courageously taken on the male-dominated mainstream tradition of Western art' (2005, p. 11). Smith speaks of herself as a healer; '... a mad scientist who builds composite bodies out of dismembered parts... taking damaged bodies and making them whole' (2005, p. 13). Her first major exhibition *Life Wants to Live* (1983), included cotton gauze works painted with newspaper reports about battered women

who had taken vengeance on their aggressors (2005, p. 7). There is a sense in which many of Smith's works, in particular her sculptures of dissected and dismembered women, redress male aggression historically perpetrated against the female body in artistic and literary representation. The fragmentation of the female body at the hands of male artists has seen it reduced to a site of the projection of male fantasy and domination. Smith's employment of fragmentation and dismemberment is neither violent nor eroticised. It is also frequently and ironically, empowering; reclaiming the female body from victimhood and encouraging a reading of the female body that subverts conventional patriarchal ascendancy.

This sentiment is particularly captured in Smith's striking plaster and glass sculpture of a hybrid female form; *Daphne* (Figure 91), created in 1993. This work depicts a naked female body, the lower limbs, hands and head of which are replaced by the branches of a tree. It references the story of Greek mythology in which the nymph Daphne transforms into a laurel tree to avoid being raped by the god Apollo. The transformation of the woman to avoid violent sexual attack is captured in Smith's life-size work. That the woman divests herself of body parts as an act of self-preservation is ironic in the art-historical context in which the male artist has traditionally dismembered the female body as an act of destructive violence. Smith demonstrates woman's power to transform herself from eternal victim of male violence and lust into a strong, independent figure, in control of her own sexuality. The figure of Daphne is empowered by her own resourcefulness; the changes in her body have not occurred as a result of male violence, but as an expression of her own agency.



Figure 91. Kiki Smith, *Daphne*, 1993

Smith was drawn to the anatomical body and representations of human mortality in the early part of her career as a result of growing up with her father, sculptor, Tony Smith's collection of skeletons he used for anatomical sketches. She describes living with 'the dead things in the dead parts of the house' (Posner 2005, p. 11). After the death of her father, Smith became fascinated with mortality and studied anatomy to become familiar

with the inner workings of the human body (Bird 2003, p. 16). A series of works focussing on dissected body organs ensued, as well as figures of partial and flayed bodies, or bodies with organs and internal structures extending beyond the skin. Many of these works are reminiscent of the anatomical artworks by male artists that illustrate seventeenth and eighteenth-century medical texts. Ilka Becker suggests that Smith 'worked through the entire register of anatomical dissection' in an attempt to 'reanimate the lifeless body' (Reinhardt & Smith 2001, p. 36). That Smith has primarily focussed on representations of the dismembered female body however, suggests that a response to the fragmentation of the female body by male artists is also a particularly strong motivation in her work. Smith also portrays famous religious or historical female characters in subversive ways to challenge conventional associations derived from their traditional representation by male artists.

In *Virgin Mary* (1992) (Figure 92), the use of the écorché figure represents a reinterpretation of orthodox medical illustrations of the musculature of the human body. The Virgin Mary has been a staple figure of Western art. Traditionally portrayed as maternal and divine, Smith's depiction of her as alone, naked and flayed is particularly provocative. In Smith's life-size sculpture, a full-bodied Mary is fleshy and vulnerable. Her stance is static and passive, with feet together; arms slightly spread from her sides; cupped hands facing outwards. The pose is one of supplication; a request to be acknowledged as a person rather than a divine being; perhaps a celebration of mortality. By naming the écorché figure, Smith subverts traditional medical illustrations in which the figure is always unidentified.



Figure 92. Kiki Smith, *Virgin Mary*, 1992

This subjectification personalises the figure and demands an alternate engagement with the body. Artistic portrayals of Mary have followed certain conventions tied to masculine fantasies associated with the Eve/Mary dichotomy, whereby Eve represents carnality and sexual temptation and Mary exemplifies inviolate virtue. By removing her skin, Mary is effectively demythologised: a human figure of flesh and bone, no longer defined by her traditional masculine construction. Posner suggests that ‘one of Smith’s most important contributions as an artist has been to reclaim the female body from patriarchy and to refigure it as the site of women’s lived experience’ (2005, p. 20). Smith herself states of her work;

‘our bodies are basically stolen from us... it is about trying to reclaim one’s own turf, or one’s own vehicle of being here, to own it and to use it to look at how we are here’ (Bird 2003, p. 51). By rehumanising the figure of Mary, using a mode of representation standardised by male illustrators of anatomical bodies, Smith has effectively redeemed her body, and by extension the female body that she connotes, from a linear, masculine art-historical tradition.



Figure 93. Kiki Smith, *Body*, 1995



Figure 94. Roman, *Aphrodite Anadyomene*, 1st Century

Smith cites the work of Bourgeois as particularly influential on her own practice (Posner 2005, p. 10). *Body* (1995) (Figure 93) is strongly reminiscent of many of Bourgeois’ soft sculptures, in its random patchwork of cotton material filled with polyester fibre, in the form of a naked, truncated female body. Its similarity with the marble statue of *Aphrodite Anadyomene* (Figure 94) held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is also unmistakable, with the marble-coloured cotton fabric, missing

head and arms, the tilt of the shoulders and the absent lower legs and feet, with the left leg slightly longer than the right. The patchwork fabric used in the construction of the work is inevitably gendered and acts as a subterfuge to the Classical representation of the female body. Marble sculptures from Classical antiquity have long epitomised the Western conception of the ideal body, but once again these works were always the creation of male sculptors and thus reflected a male construction of human beauty. Marble is obdurate and unyielding; it is associated with longevity and immutability. As a result ideal female beauty has been 'set in stone' for millennia. By replicating the structural characteristics of Classical representations of the female form, but employing a medium associated with 'women's work' that is pliable and yielding, Smith demonstrates again the refusal to accept conventional masculine constructions of the female body. Rather she suggests a feminine view of the female body that is fluid and transformative.

The dismemberment of the body is a calculated device that references the Classical statuary employed in traditional academic artistic education, in which imagery of the truncated female body was produced ad nauseam by students. Reduced to a torso, the female body is objectified; the focus becomes centred on its sexual parts, a point playfully observed by Smith's inclusion of shiny gold discs to draw attention to the nipples and pubic area. In *Body*, Smith successfully challenges and parodies patriarchal institutions and conventions that have perpetuated the reification of the female body.



Figure 95. Kiki Smith, *Daisy Chain*, 1992

Among Smith's most thought-provoking works is a cast bronze and metal sculpture of a woman's hands, feet and head, connected by a heavy metal chain over two metres in length. *Daisy Chain* (1992) (Figures 95 & 96), can be arranged to form the shape of a daisy or a range of other shapes and can be read as a criticism of the manipulation of the female body in contemporary Western society. The employment of just the hands, feet and head of the woman mean that the work is gendered but not sexualised, and the heavy metal chains allude to the chains of domesticity that women have traditionally been bound by. Materiality is once again particularly interesting here. The heavy metal elements used in the construction of the work are traditionally considered materials used by male artists and allude to the fact that female roles have largely been written by men throughout history. This is particularly evidenced in Giacometti's *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (Figure 78), a work that is formally not dissimilar to Smith's *Daisy Chain*, but profoundly different in concept; while Giacometti's



Figure 96. Kiki Smith, *Daisy Chain* (detail), 1992

perpetuates a sense of masculine contempt for female sexuality, Smith's challenges masculine ownership of the image of the female body. Chains also connote restraint and control and attached to the woman's hands, feet and head, signify manipulation of what women can do, where they can go and what they can see, hear and say. This work evolves and transforms throughout the duration of the exhibition again speaking of the transformative power of women to rewrite their identity despite their history of subordination to male dominance.

Smith's employment of artistic conventions founded in medical illustrations validates their utility as effective components of a contemporary artistic vocabulary. The power of Smith's work to confront and challenge masculine constructions of the female body derives from her

employment of the artistic devices that male artists used to fragment and objectify it. For the first fifteen years of her career, Smith used the dismembered, fractured and flayed female form as a metaphor for what she saw as a society divided by conventionally established dichotomies. Her artworks are often more contemplative than angry; they speak of an adjustment of attitudes and approaches towards the body and a healing of wounds. She writes:

Our bodies have been broken apart bit by bit and need a lot of healing; our whole society is very fragmented – everything is split and presented in dichotomies – male/female, body/mind – and those splits need mending (Posner 2005, p. 13).



Figure 97. Kiki Smith, *Cadaver Table*, 1996



Figure 98. Kiki Smith, *Cadaver Table* (detail), 1996

Anatomical dissection was one of the sources of imagery that Smith saw as an effective tool to address social divisions and gender constructions. In an interview with artist Chuck Close in 1994, Smith recalls her participation in human dissections and her fascination for the form of the

body after the internal organs have been removed, stating: 'You're left with a basin. I still would love to cast the interior of the abdominal cavity and the chest cavity' (Close 1994). Smith's *Cadaver Table* (1996) (Figures 97 & 98) captures the basin shape that so inspired her; cast in bronze with the impression of the body captured within the table. While this work references her aesthetic interest in the body cavity, the depth of the imprint made by the anatomical body in the surface of the bronze also attests to its importance in her artistic practice. Anatomical dissection had historically been considered a male prerogative (Cunningham 2010, p. 142), and the artistic representation of the dissected corpse had likewise traditionally been in the hands of male artists. In *Cadaver Table*, Smith usurps the role of the male anatomist and anatomical artist. She has taken on their prerogative in dissecting and documenting the human corpse but here the body is absent. Its former presence is acknowledged in the impression it has left behind, but it is no longer available to be subjected to the myriad implied and actual abuses at the hands of male anatomists and artists. The autopsy table itself is penetrated, but the body has gone.

Smith's *Untitled* (1992) (Figure 99), references human dissection more directly and also attempts a further reconciliation of the divisions in gender constructions. This work is another life-size papier Mache sculpture of a standing human figure. Here though the gender is unspecified, with no definite sexual characteristics included. An incision has been made in the chest in the region of the sternum that extends down the centre of the abdomen. From this wound spills hand-dyed Nepalese paper which falls like uncoiled intestines, trailing on the floor in front of the figure. Like the



Figure 99. Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1992

gender of the figure, the organs represented by the flood of highly-patterned paper are undifferentiated, enhancing the universality of the figure. As with Smith's *Virgin Mary*, the figure is passive; hands by its sides, head raised and front-facing. There is no emotional reaction from the figure to the organs spilling from its belly, marking this as a symbolic figure rather than a literal dissected subject. The meaning of the work is quite readily legible in the context of Smith's body of work: the things that divide us are much less significant than the commonalities that we all possess. Smith reminds us that we are all human; flesh and blood and those dichotomies which she wishes to heal are largely artificial and frequently destructive.

Describing Kiki Smith's artworks produced from the early 1980s to the late 1990s Jo Anna Isaac observes, 'Women's bodies are flayed, chained, crucified, dragged through the streets, hanged as witches, or, like Joan of Arc, about to be burnt atop enormous pyres of wood' (Bird 2003, p.

60). To this list could be added 'dismembered and dissected' and it would appear strange that an artist so intent on 'healing the wounds' of metaphorical and literal violence against the female body, would employ such a diverse range of savage and brutal violations of the female form. The best way to describe her approach perhaps would be through the idiom 'fighting fire with fire'. Smith has employed the same devices that male artists have used throughout history to disempower women and perpetuate masculine fantasies, to create intriguing and thought-provoking artworks that fashion new narratives for women that consistently re-empower the vulnerable female body.

Cindy Sherman: Doll's play

American photographic artist Cindy Sherman's *Sex Pictures* photographs from the 1990s, go a step further in neutralising conventional stereotypes of female sexuality. By employing prosthetic body parts in the construction of grotesque sexual tableaux, Sherman's work can be located in the artistic tradition of dissected and dismembered female forms. In her essay 'A Body Slate: Cindy Sherman' (2004), Johanna Burton references Foster's assertion that Bellmer, despite illustrating his own sadistic impulses in the construction of his *Poupées*, also identified with them, 'thereby becoming the masochistic subject upon which his own sadism was enacted' (2006, p. 197). In this interpretation, Bellmer's self-loathing compels him to vicariously dissect, dismember and abuse himself through the brutalised dolls he employs. Burton suggests that an extrapolation of this theory would mean that 'any portrayal of a fragmented, dissolute female form, then, necessarily refers to its male counterpart's own deepest fears and/or wishes

for self-annihilation' (2006, p. 198). She goes on to question how this thesis applies when the representation of the fragmented female body is created by a female. Her suggestion is that the outcome is inverted so that rather than illustrating her self-destruction, the female artist 'armours herself' (2006, p. 198). As discussed in reference to the works of Bourgeois and Smith, the female artist taking a knife to the female body challenges conventional engagements with the female form and can result in a sense of empowerment residing in the represented body. Like Bourgeois' truncated, hermaphroditic sculptures, Sherman's *Sex Pictures* frequently employ dismembered and rejoined male and female body parts in almost comic tableaux that lampoon contemporary pornographic imagery and destabilise traditional engagements with representations of the anatomical body.

Sherman's artistic practice has long included the use of prosthetic body parts, wigs, costumes and masks. These have been employed as embellishments to her own body to aid in her reinvention of characters aimed at confronting the performance of gender. The prosthetics are never seamless additions to her body; their transparent artificiality highlighting the mechanics of traditional gender construction in Western society. As such Sherman has challenged the notion of fixed female identities by acting out femininity in accordance with Western popular cultural stereotypes. In her *Sex Pictures* series, Sherman has totally removed her own body from the work, instead relying on the medical prosthetics by themselves to present a narrative based on pornographic imagery to intentionally confuse conventional responses to representations of sexuality. Interestingly the



Figure 100. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #263*, 1992

deliberate dislocation of the pornographic narrative effectively de-eroticises the body (Colby 2012, p. 182). Sherman's states: 'I wanted to imitate something out of culture, and also make fun of the culture while I was doing it' (Burton 2006, p. 65). This deliberate lampooning of cultural stereotypes is achieved in her *Sex Pictures* photographs. The figures in these works are so self-consciously sexualised that they become parodies of the pornographic image; the dismemberment adding to the confusion as demonstrated in *Untitled #263* (1992) (Figure 100).

In this work, the truncated torso immediately calls to mind Bellmer's photograph of his double-limbed doll (Figure 75), but formally perhaps it is even more similar to van Rymdsdyk's dismembered pregnant female torsos in its symmetry and explicitness. *Untitled #263* replicates a still from a pornographic film with the lurid satin sheets and gratuitous display of genitalia (Sherman et al. 1997, p. 25). The central figure combines the upper thighs and lower abdomen of naked female and male mannequins in a

grotesque amalgam so that they become a single hermaphroditic figure. The female section faces the viewer with truncated thighs drawn apart. The prosthetic vaginal area has been embellished by Sherman to increase its realism; a dense bush of dark pubic hair has been added, although the labia are still clearly visible complete with emerging tampon string. The counterpart section is clearly male with obvious male genitalia. A ring has been added to the penis below the glans again in reference to pornographic imagery, while a wide orange-coloured ribbon is drawn around the middle of the figure, obscuring the join of the two sections with the ends of the bow framing the vaginal region. On either side of the central figure, decapitated heads gaze upon the respective female and male sections of the torso. The sexual identity of the figure is necessarily ambiguous, 'creating the kind of slippage that is meant, precisely, to blur their meaning, rather than to reify it, or better, to create meaning itself as blurred' (Krauss 1993, p. 208). Thus the figure is impossible to categorise absolutely in regard to gender and sexuality. Nochlin describes Sherman and Bourgeois' confections of body parts as examples of 'postmodern' bodies in which 'the very notion of a unified, unambiguously gendered subject is rendered suspect...' (1994, p. 55). The gender ambiguity is also realised in the gazes of the two disembodied faces, which directed equally at both the female and male sections, effectively cancel each other out, liberating the work from a gendered reading.

A similar sense of gender slippage occurs in *Untitled #261* (1992) (Figure 101), in which Sherman has placed a prosthetic male head on a



Figure 101. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #261*, 1992

dismembered female torso. This work is far less adorned, with the various parts clearly detached from each other. The figure in this photograph is observed from above, the wide-eyed upside-down face gazing directly out at the viewer. The articulation of the head with the torso is revealed, and the female breasts are placed on the upper torso with no attempt to disguise their sham. The vagina is unadorned and the legs are absent, with the figure

terminating in the smooth concave recesses of the hip joints. As with *Untitled #263*, the figure in this work is displayed on satin sheeting to reference pornographic imagery but even less attempt at realism is demonstrated in this work. We could read the fact that it is the female section that is dismembered as misogynistic but contextually this photograph sits within a larger body of work that indiscriminately dismembers bodies regardless of gender.

The transparency of construction in this image obviates the Western construction of the erotic image. The satin sheeting is also reminiscent of the display of the late-eighteenth century Italian wax anatomical models discussed earlier. The dismembered 'Wax Venuses' however were eroticised because of the way they were displayed and the fact that they could be reassembled and presented as entire, alluring 'women'. The dismemberment of the figures in Sherman's *Sex Pictures* undermines their eroticism, reducing them to assortments of sexual parts almost randomly fitted together. This augments the abject quality of the figures and is deliberately counter-intuitive resulting in clumsy, almost asexual forms.

Untitled #259 (1992) (Figure 102) follows a similar pattern to Sherman's other *Sex Pictures* photographs but focuses more specifically on male prosthetic parts. A male mannequin is again displayed on satin fabric but the various body parts are largely detached from one another. A male head with painted on hair is presented from behind and extends from the top of the picture frame, the angle of the head impossible if joined to the torso conventionally. The naked torso sits upon, but is not connected to, the belly,



Figure 102. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #259*, 1992

across which detached arms are almost haphazardly arranged. Below this, the pelvic region with severely truncated thighs display flaccid male genitalia with strange, spiky artificial pubic hair above a shiny synthetic blonde wig connoting the head of a female doll or mannequin. An ambiguous projection extends from the anal region of the figure, adding another level of sexual confusion to the work. The body is particularly abstracted in this work. Sexual activity is hinted at by the positioning of the female wig, but again the work is largely un-erotic. All of Sherman's *Sex Pictures* are essentially imagined bodies; impossible constructions. The body parts are no more than plastic objects juxtaposed with each other in vague approximations of human bodies. The obvious artificiality denies eroticism, and the uncanny quality, so disturbing in Bellmer's work, all but

disappears in Sherman's dehumanised fabrications.

While making these works, Sherman wrote 'I was thinking how the surrealists were very much into de Sade and thus misogynistic which rather intrigued me, I guess because the main thing that bothered me with their work was in the beautification of the woman used, not how they were used' (Sherman et al. 1997, p. 184). This is an interesting observation when we consider the beautification of the female corpses illustrated in nineteenth-century autopsy artworks. Bronfen suggests that the beautified representation of death achieved in von Max's *Der Anatom* for example, placed it into 'the service of the aesthetic process' (Bronfen 1992, p. 5). By making the dead female body aesthetically pleasing, the artist invites the viewer to take pleasure in the eroticised female corpse informing the suggestion of male sexual fantasy around the vulnerable and available female body. Similarly, Bellmer's erotic constructions of abused and vulnerable female dolls also act as feticides figures; embodying the projections of the artist's own misogynistic fantasies. Sherman's dismemberment of medical mannequins to construct her tableaux can be read as a literal dismemberment and reconstruction of identity by the artist, which inevitably contextualises her work with Bellmer's dismembered and reconstructed dolls. Subversion of Surrealist misogyny is a particular aim in Sherman's photographs, with her suggestion that 'a successful surrealistic ploy here would be to diffuse the ugly-reality of misogyny by twisting the reality – surreal! – Voila!' (1997, p. 185).

In 1999 Sherman created another series of photographs of mutilated dolls. Simply titled: *Broken Dolls*, the series is comprised of twelve small



Figure 103. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #341*, 1999

black and white photographs of dolls which have been torn apart and reassembled in degrading poses and obscene postures. These works differ from the earlier *Sex Pictures* series in that rather than employing mannequin parts that have been placed in interesting juxtapositions, the dolls in this series frequently include actual dissections made by Sherman. Here the artist becomes the anatomist, although the cuts she makes are aimed at evidencing outlandish sexual violence rather than investigating what lies beneath the skin. *Untitled #341* (1999) (Figure 103) is a blurred, close-up image of a doll's face surrounded by numerous doll fingers and hands. The action of the hands is ambiguous, but the face itself has been horribly abused and cut. Sherman has removed its lips and cut the mouth into a gruesome grin, while the lids of its closed eyes are broken and traumatised. In the context of the series, we read the doll as a victim of violent sexual abuse. Despite the confronting nature of the subject of this work, Sherman

once again makes us aware of the artificiality of the fabrication. While it is provocative and thought-provoking, it elicits intrigue, but little erotic interest.



Figure 104. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #343*, 1999

A final work by Sherman, also from her *Broken Dolls* series, is far more sexually explicit and confronting. *Untitled #343* (Figure 104) calls to mind Dix's black and white *Lustmord* artworks from the early 1920s, in its depiction of a female figure; the victim of an apparently horrendous sex attack. The deliberate blurring of this image suggests a hastily shot crime scene photograph; perhaps taken by the assailant before he escapes: a

souvenir of the depraved attack. Here though the victim is once again a bizarrely constructed doll. The head and arms of this figure are those of an adult female doll with garish make-up and a mane of dark hair. Disturbingly, these body parts have been joined to the torso and legs of a baby doll and it is here that the most horrific injury is located. A gaping vaginal-shaped wound dissects the lower abdomen between the doll's legs suggesting a vicious and brutal rape. The size of the wound is out of all proportion to the tiny body, implying penetration by a large object, the edges of the wound flowering outward as the weapon has been withdrawn. Part of the head has also been beaten or burnt; the hands are thrown up in a defensive gesture while the wide-open eyes and mouth testify to the terror of the attack. If the body photographed was that of a real child or woman, we would recoil in horror, particularly because it appears that the victim of the brutal attack appears to be still living despite the obviously mortal wound. The body here though is made of plastic, the expression of horror is painted on and the wound is bloodless. The whole scenario is a deliberate feint and the power of the work is not in its realism but in its calculated parody of transgressive human desire.

As with all of Sherman's photographs of brutalised dolls *Untitled #341 and #343* are forays into the grotesque; a make-believe world of hybrid forms acting out bizarre human interactions and situations. Sherman's *Broken Dolls* and *Sex Pictures* series were both included in *The Vivisector* exhibition held in the Sprüth Magers Gallery in London in 2013. The title of the show refers to the cutting open of a living body for anatomical or pathological investigation, directly referencing Sherman's

representations of her anatomical subjects as vital and conscious despite their gaping wounds or impossible amalgamations of body parts. Aesthetic relationships exist between Sherman's doll and mannequin photographs and early artworks depicting the dissection and dismemberment of the female body, but the blatant artificiality and fanciful constructions in her works are ultimately un-erotic and effectively subvert conventional masculine constructions of female sexuality. Through the use of female and male prosthetic body parts arranged in perverse reconstructions of pornographic tableaux, and abused but patently artificial dolls, Sherman neutralises masculine erotic fantasy and helps to liberate the dissected female body from its representation as a locus of male derision, transgressive desire and punishment.

Conclusion

As an ostensibly medical and scientific procedure, the power to dissect was traditionally a male prerogative, and its representation in art perpetuated its utility as a tool of sexual violence and domination. From the mid to late-eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries in Europe, male artists employed the guise of medicine and science to build on an art historical legacy that portrayed women as sexually deviant, dangerous and unknowable, to interrogate the source of female sexuality. In the early twentieth century, male artists maintained the use of the trope of the dissected and dismembered female corpse in works that continued to objectify and punish women for their sexuality, using a variety of additional social and personal motivations to excuse works that frequently degraded and reified the female form. Later in the twentieth and into the twenty-first

centuries, Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman also used the figure of the dissected and dismembered female body in their work. However in the hands of these female artists, the literal deconstruction of the female body effectively challenges conventional masculine constructions of female sexuality and exposes the artificiality of the masculine fantasy of the dissected female form.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have demonstrated that social, scientific and medical changes occurring in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe combined with an art-historical tradition that objectified and demonised women and contributed to the emergence of a discernibly new trope of female death embodied in the eroticised female autopsy subject. By contrasting works of this genre with male autopsy artworks created both prior to and throughout the nineteenth century, I have shown that male artists constructed a totally different autopsy scenario when the subject was female. Up until this time, autopsy artworks generally followed a formulaic approach that highlighted the important educative nature of explorations of the human corpse and illustrated the study of human anatomy as an exclusively male concern. Male artists painted male anatomists, who were shown dissecting male cadavers surrounded by a host of male attendants, students and observers... but where were the women? The almost total exclusion of women from the sphere of anatomical study and the dearth of artistic engagements with the dissected female corpse up until the late eighteenth century is striking.

The dramatic arrival of the female body on the anatomist's table in artistic representation in the late eighteenth century and the preoccupation with portrayals of female autopsies in the nineteenth century is the central focus of this thesis. Here the relationship between male anatomist and female corpse is shown to be the central concern of the work, and the educative or scientific nature of male autopsy artworks is subverted by the absence of students or attendants and the eroticisation of the corpse. As a

result the inevitably beautiful, young female corpses are shown to be the subjects of prurient interest. Alone with the anatomist, their bodies are exposed and vulnerable. Their flesh is depicted as firm and inviting, with little evidence testifying to the absence of life. These tableaux are shown to be fabrications; idealised masculine constructions of female bodies that are unaffected by death except to make them pliant and sexually available to the anatomist's figurative and literal penetration.

The eroticisation of the female autopsy subject was shown to have arisen as a response to male anxieties about female sexuality, a situation fomented by the changing roles of women under industrialisation and a massive increase in prostitution which saw women characterised as sexually treacherous and responsible for the moral corruption of society. The anxiety produced by the sexually immoral woman in nineteenth-century Europe was shown to be partly assuaged by her placement under the control of the male anatomist as she lay beneath his knife. Even here though, she was revealed to continue to exert her troubling sexual influence, as the conflicted anatomist is portrayed as being torn between his desire for her body and his duty to dissect it. The identification of the young bodies displayed in these works as those of women who were deemed sexually transgressive, provided a subtext of punishment to the act of dissection. By cutting, dissecting and dismembering the source of these anxieties, the male anatomist is shown to take revenge for all men on the perfidious nature of female sexuality while attempting to discover the metaphorical and literal 'germ' that was considered to reside within the body of the immoral woman. The sexual anxiety produced by the female corpses in these artworks

informed the conclusion posited in this thesis that they can be regarded as examples of the *femme fatale*, a description not previously ascribed to works of this genre.

Despite the emergence of artistic representations of the anatomised female body in the nineteenth century and the strikingly different treatment they are afforded in comparison to their male counterparts, there has been little research done in this area. While there has been some discussion of the emergence of a fascination with the female corpse in literature and medicine, as exemplified by the writings of Elisabeth Bronfen and Ludmilla Jordanova, there has been far less examination of how this manifested itself in the visual arts. Indeed, there has been a belief that the nineteenth century showed little artistic innovation in relation to the anatomised body, and works of this genre have been largely ignored in theoretical analyses (Borel, F 1990, p. 176). This thesis demonstrates however, that the changes in artistic engagements with the human autopsy in nineteenth-century Europe were significant and that the influence of the trope of the eroticised female autopsy subject can be identified in a wide range of later artistic engagements with the female body.

This thesis also contributes to discussions around the historical nexus between medicine and art. A parallel interest in autopsies along with the enhanced importance of the corpse to clinical medicine saw a burgeoning artistic interest in medical illustrations of the anatomical body. However, it was the female body that elicited the most interest by far. This was due in part to the scientific interest in investigating female reproduction, an arena which had previously been shrouded in mystery and

speculation. The increasing incidence in the rates of syphilis infection also informed a desire to understand female pathology. A combination of these social and scientific developments provided fertile ground for artists to create works that focussed on the female body as the source of life and death, desire and destruction. A discussion of the medical illustrations produced at this time demonstrated the increasing aestheticisation and eroticisation of medical imagery that informed the later female autopsy artworks.

The continuation of the theme in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, far from the social and cultural environment in which it emerged, was demonstrated in the latter part of the thesis, indicating how the image of the eroticised female autopsy crystallised into an identifiable artistic trope. The works by John Wilkes Brodnax and William Mortensen were shown to be homages to the nineteenth-century artworks they referenced, as the sampling of the motif was based more on an appreciation of the aesthetic characteristics rather than a response to the same social and scientific developments that inspired the originals.

In the inter-war years in Germany the dissection and dismemberment of the female body as an act of punishment was shown to be manifest in new artistic expressions at a time when violent crimes against women were particularly prevalent. The growing political and economic power of women in Germany through their necessary entrance into the workforce during the First World War, along with an increasing incidence of prostitution and syphilis infection contributed to a re-emergence of many of the same fears around female sexuality that inspired the nineteenth-century female autopsy

artworks. Here though, the fragmentation of the female body was demonstrated in a plethora of *Lustmord* artworks, particularly by Otto Dix and George Grosz, in which the female body is sexually assaulted, violently dismembered and discarded. Once again in these works, masculine sexual fantasy permeates the artistic constructions of sexual dominance of the vulnerable, punished female body.

The perpetuation of the fantasy of female dismemberment as punishment was also discussed in relation to the works of early to mid twentieth-century Surrealist artists particularly Hans Bellmer's abused and dismembered dolls. Here van Rymdyk's strange truncations of the female body are re-imagined in bizarre fetishised conjunctions of multi-limbed but headless female torsos and constructions of exposed, violated and broken girl dolls. Bellmer was not the only Surrealist artist to fragment the female body as a form of punishment. Picasso, Giacometti and Magritte are likewise shown to illustrate dismembered and reconfigured female bodies, manifesting a culture of sexual violence and misogyny in their works (Hughes 1991, p. 252).

The examples of three female artists working in the mid to late twentieth century are championed as representative female responses to the fragmentation of the female body by male artists. Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman are shown to have taken up the same metaphorical implements that male artists had been using, to re-present the dissected female form from a female perspective. The artworks they created are demonstrated to subvert and challenge conventional masculine constructions of the female body in a variety of intriguing and defiant ways.

The female body here is still cut and dismembered but frequently as a way of responding to the long history of violence against it at the hands of male aggressors, surgeons, anatomists and artists. Bourgeois' use of the knife is shown to be a weapon of defence but also aggression against male dominance, while her dismembered female forms speak eloquently of female vulnerability and provoke an empathetic response that contrasts markedly with the erotic engagement elicited by conventional male portrayals of the fragmented female body. Similarly Smith and Sherman are also shown to have created new interpretations of female dismemberment. Smith re-imagines female mythological and religious figures, using fragmentation as a tool of empowerment and wresting them from their patriarchal associations, while Sherman parodies contemporary pornographic imagery by cutting, dismembering and reconfiguring mannequins and dolls. In doing so, she creates bizarre hermaphroditic constructions and knowingly ironic expressions of abuse, which, through their blatant fabrication, neutralise their erotic power and mock the art historical tradition of the objectification of the female body.

In summary, the research discussed in this thesis contributes to a feminist discourse around the fragmented female body as a masculine construction of femininity. It demonstrates how by representing the cutting and dismembering of the female corpse, male artists have confirmed the fantasy of the violated and penetrated female body, disempowered and punished for its sexuality. In their hands it was objectified, eroticised, and violated; punished for being female and unknowable and for exciting anguish and fear in men. Just as women had for centuries been almost

totally excluded from the arena of anatomical investigations, they continued to be voiceless to contradict artistic assumptions about their sexuality and defenceless to repel the scalpels, knives, and hatchets that ceaselessly cut, dismembered and fragmented their bodies.

This thesis discusses a diverse range of artworks across a wide sweep of history. Although the research discussed is primarily focussed on historical representations of the fragmented female body, its contemporary significance is demonstrated in the extraordinary number of manifestations of the anatomised human body in the work of recent artists as well as in the popular media. While the discussions here contribute to a broader field of research that examines past cultural engagements with death, further study could investigate how the burgeoning depictions of human dissection in popular visual culture such as television crime shows, reflect contemporary engagements with death. The relationship between medicine and art discussed in this thesis also presents interesting additional avenues for research. The recent return in the training of medical students to artistically represent the organs and structures of the body instead of relying on digital photography offers intriguing possibilities in interdisciplinary research and a re-examination of the historical nexus between art and science. Perhaps most importantly though, in light of the complicity of male artists throughout history in objectifying women for the male gaze, further research that helps to unravel the extraordinarily long and convoluted history of masculine constructions of femininity offers the most rewarding possibilities in extending this research.

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